POPPY OTT'S PEDIGREED PICKLES

BY LEO EDWARDS

Jack Stapled.

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"OH!" SHE CRIED, "AREN'T THEY PERFECTLY DELICIOUS!"
Poppy Ott's Pedigreed Pickles.

Frontispiece (*Page* 23)

POPPY OTT'S
PEDIGREED PICKLES

BY

LEO EDWARDS

AUTHOR OF
THE POPPY OTT BOOKS
THE JERRY TODD BOOKS

ILLUSTRATED BY
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To
AUNT DELL

OUR CHATTER-BOX

THE earlier editions of this book did not contain a "Chatter-Box." But so popular has this department become (I started it with my sixteenth book) that my publisher asked me to prepare a brief "Chatter-Box" for all of my early books.

The boys and girls who read my books supply the material for this department. As the author of the books, all I have to do is to assemble the material. If you are one of the many hundreds of boys who have written to me, it may be that your letter was incorporated in the "Chatter-Box" in one of my other books. Writers of accepted poems receive, as a reward, a free autographed copy of the book in which their poem appears. The fine poems (all written by boys and girls who call themselves Jerry Todd and Poppy Ott fans) contained in the "Chatter-Boxes" in my recent books will interest you. But if you can't write poetry, built around the characters in my books, be sure and write me a letter. If you make your letter interesting I'll try hard to find a place for it in a future "Chatter-Box." I doubt if I could fully express the pleasure that I derive from the many letters that I receive. My boy pals! That is the way I regard the writers of these dandy letters. So the more letters I receive the more pals I'll have. And I sure like pals!

LETTERS

"IN OUR lodge," writes Burt Cherney of Philadelphia, Pa., "we are going to have a Goldfish library, out of which only members can take books. The library will consist largely of your books. We have a lot of boys seeking membership into our lodge and I hope in time that they all will belong to it. Our officers are:

"Burton Cherney, Gold Fin; Harvey Summers, Silver Fin; James Connor, Freckled Fin."

"We are getting along pretty good," reports the secretary of the Mandan, North Dakota, chapter. "We take in plenty of money each meeting, but we have a dickens of a time finding

a place to meet in. Spring has come and the snow has made lots of mud. Nobody wants their house full of mud, so there you are! What would you do about it? Oh, heck! There I go telling my troubles. Say, would you tell me the first person to join? I'd like to write to him and ask him all about himself and so on. We had a Valentine party last Friday. Boy, did we eat, and how! We all had to bring grub and there was cocoa, two cakes, doughnuts, apples and fudge. We had the party in Bob Swanson's house. We are only having our meetings once in two weeks on account of the mud. The night of the party Bob's little brother ate some mustard. Boy, you should have seen his face. Though he is only two years old he can talk as well as I can. He can count to ten and he's a smart little guy. We have 48 cents in the treasury and when we get another two cents we're going to buy *Jerry Todd and the Bob-Tailed Elephant.*"

"We had another club meeting yesterday," writes Albert Morgan of Jamaica, L. I., N. Y. "We sure have our clubhouse fixed up nice. On the wall we have a big picture of a Freckled Goldfish drawn by Bill Dyierson. His brother never read a Poppy Ott book. I lent him what I think is the best Poppy Ott book—the *Stuttering Parrot.* Now he reads all of them he can get. Boy, I sure do pester the woman down at Gertz bookstore where I buy my books. I'm down there almost every day asking when the latest Leo Edwards books will be out. The Trigger Berg books must be good sellers because they are all sold. I read the *700 Mouse Traps* and the *Treasure Tree.* They are great. At the last club meeting Bill Carpenter asked who was going to write you a letter this week. I said I was. So the members asked me to ask you for a picture of yourself to hang in the clubroom. This is station M-E signing off."

Any boy or girl may secure one of my enlarged autographed pictures by sending ten cents in stamps to my publisher, Grosset & Dunlap, 1140 Broadway, New York, N. Y.

"My name is Samuel Ferguson and I am Goldfish member No. 2963," writes Sam from his new home in Vineland, N. J. "In another letter I asked you if we could have a code booklet like the one I sent you. All of the members of our club have code booklets. You say the Freckled Goldfish club is for fun. Don't you think a secret code booklet would add to the fun? You could write something in the 'Chatter-Box' in code. Besides fellows like letters in secret code. Maybe you will put added secrets into the booklet such as handshakes, passwords, etc. Are Poppy, Peg, Scoop and Red real boys? Is Cap'n Tinkertop a real man? Is the Stricker gang real? And is the fourth quarry real?"

How about it, fellows?—would you like to have secret code booklets such as Sam describes? Suppose you write to me about it. I dare say that if enough of the members want code booklets, we can arrange to get them out.

Yes, Sam, Poppy, Peg, Scoop and Red are real boys. Capt'n Tinkertop is real. And I've swam in the fourth quarry many, many times.

And here's another report from Bill Hopwood of Primos, Pa.

"Any member of our club who reads both the Jerry Todd and the Poppy Ott books," writes Bill, "gets a badge of a gold freckled-fish. Those reading just Poppy Ott or Jerry Todd get a silver freckled-fish badge. Those reading one-half of each get a plain colored fish with freckles. Here is our salute: I pledge allegiance to the Goldfish flag and to the society for which it stands, one chapter indivisible, with fun and reading for all."

"Next Monday night," writes Tom Hanson, Jr., of Sault Ste Marie, Mich., "we are going to have a big feed. We're going to have roast pork, mashed potatoes and gravy and ice cream. Here is a yell our club uses a lot:

F. G. Rah!
F. G. Rah!
Freckled Goldfish!
Rah! Rah! Rah!

And here's a letter that I received when I was in Florida last winter:

"Thanks for the 'Me-Too' pin," writes Howard Hoadley of Findlay, Ohio. "Sunday our Scout troop opened Sunday School with the regular Scout exercises. After Sunday School the minister preached a sermon about Joseph, the first Boy Scout. I have an uncle and aunt living in St. Petersburg; I thought maybe you would like to call on them, so am enclosing their address. I can hardly wait for your new books to come out. I have tried to get copies of your Trigger Berg books at our book store, but haven't succeeded so far. Please let me know where I can get them."

I'm sure, Howard, your book dealer will order the Trigger Berg books for you if you'll ask him to. Or you can write direct to Grosset & Dunlap, whose address is given in another place in this "Chatter-Box."

"Our first meeting of the year will be held next Saturday," writes Bob Halligan of Ozone Park, L. I., N. Y. "We would like to have our buttons in a bunch. I guess we'll need an even dozen. Thanks for using our club news in a recent 'Chatter-Box.' We have five dollars in a big bank and a dollar in a school bank. Not so bad, huh? Have you any of-fish-al stationery? If so, I would like to get some, and would also like to have an autographed picture of yourself for our clubroom. I am going to get your new Todd and Ott books as soon as they come out. I can hardly wait! I would

appreciate any suggestions you could give me on things to do during the coming year, such as different kinds of parties, hikes and such stuff."

"I know that you are real busy with all the letters you receive from your admirers," writes Allen Ross of Erie, Pa., "but I wanted to tell you about an incident that happened the day I got my Freckled Goldfish button. I wanted to mystify my chums. And when I saw one of them coming toward me I pointed to my badge and made the customary swimming sign. Then to my great astonishment instead of looking puzzled he repeated the sign, after which he showed me his membership card! I am sending you a couple of verses. They aren't much, but it won't do any harm to try. If you do use them in a 'Chatter-Box' I'll sure feel proud because it's always been my ambition to write. Here they are:

Jerry Todd has a gang,
The finest bunch in town.
They always make the best of things
And smile when others frown.

But more than that, these dandy lads
Make good times out of bad.
So take a tip from Jerry's gang—
Let nothing make you sad.

FRECKLED GOLDFISH

OUT of my book, *Poppy Ott and the Freckled Goldfish*, has grown our great Freckled Goldfish lodge, membership in which is open to all boys and girls who are interested in my books. Thousands of readers have joined the club. We have peachy membership cards (designed by Bert Salg, the popular illustrator of my books) and fancy buttons. Also for members who want to organize branch clubs (hundreds are in successful operation, providing boys and girls with added fun) we have rituals.

To join (and to be a loyal Jerry Todd fan I think you ought to join), please observe these simple rules:

(1) Write (or print) your name plainly.

(2) Supply your complete printed address.

(3) Give your age.

(4) Enclose two two-cent postage stamps (for card and button).

(5) Address your letter to

Leo Edwards,
Cambridge,
Wisconsin.

LOCAL CHAPTERS

TO HELP young organizers we have produced a printed ritual which any member who wants to start a Freckled Goldfish club in his own neighborhood can't afford to be without. This booklet tells how to organize the club, how to conduct meetings, how to transact all club business, and, probably most important of all, how to initiate candidates.

The complete initiation is given word for word. Naturally these booklets are more or less

secret. So, if you send for one, please do not show it to anyone who isn't a Freckled Goldfish. Three chief officers will be required to put on the initiation, which can be given in any member's home, so, unless each officer is provided with a booklet, much memorizing will have to be done. The best plan is to have three booklets to a chapter. These may be secured (at cost) at six cents each (three two-cent stamps) or three for sixteen cents (eight two-cent stamps). Address all orders to Leo Edwards, Cambridge, Wisconsin.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	Poppy's Pickle Parlor	1
II	Our "Silent" Partner	16
III	Whose Pickles	27
IV	A Busy Day	36
V	Butch McGinty	46
VI	Poppy's "Aunt Jemima" Scheme	57
VII	Mrs. O'Mally's Peculiar Fright	65
VIII	Ready for Business	73
IX	The World Tips Over	87
X	The Gold Cucumber	96
XI	The Cat Killer	106
XII	Mrs. O'Mally's "Ghost"	114
XIII	The Banker's Threats	126
XIV	Underground	139
XV	Midnight Excitement	152
XVI	The Man in the Cave	161
XVII	Uncle Abner's Story	174
XVIII	Poppy's Pedigreed Pickles	188
XIX	Dark Days	203
XX	Poppy Springs a Surprise	214
XXI	In the Shadow of the Chimney	226
XXII	Guests of Honor	235

LEO EDWARDS' BOOKS

Here is a complete list of Leo Edwards' published books:

THE TRIGGER BERG SERIES

Trigger Berg and the Treasure Tree
Trigger Berg and His 700 Mouse Traps
Trigger Berg and the Sacred Pig

THE JERRY TODD SERIES

Jerry Todd and the Whispering Mummy
Jerry Todd and the Rose-Colored Cat
Jerry Todd and the Oak Island Treasure
Jerry Todd and the Waltzing Hen
Jerry Todd and the Talking Frog
Jerry Todd and the Purring Egg
Jerry Todd in the Whispering Cave
Jerry Todd, Pirate
Jerry Todd and the Bob-Tailed Elephant
Jerry Todd, Editor-in-Grief

THE POPPY OTT SERIES

Poppy Ott and the Stuttering Parrot
Poppy Ott's Seven-League Stilts
Poppy Ott and the Galloping Snail
Poppy Ott's Pedigreed Pickles
Poppy Ott and the Freckled Goldfish
Poppy Ott and the Tittering Totem
Poppy Ott and the Prancing Pancake

THE ANDY BLAKE SERIES

Andy Blake
Andy Blake's Comet Coaster
Andy Blake's Secret Service
Andy Blake and the Pot of Gold

POPPY OTT'S
PEDIGREED PICKLES

CHAPTER I

POPPY'S PICKLE PARLOR

WHEN Poppy Ott jumps into a thing he usually knows where he's going to land. For he's a pretty smart boy for his age, as you probably will agree with me if you have read the earlier books that I have written about him. But, bu-lieve me, his wits sure were tangled up the day he got that "Pickle Parlor" idea! Or, at least, that is what I told him when he first sprung his brilliant little scheme on me.

In arguing with him, to bring him down to earth as it were, I tried to convince him that a Pickle Parlor was about as sensible as a barber shop for hairless poodles. No one, I said, referring to the people who bought groceries, would buy their sugar and other truck in one store and then walk a block to buy their pickles in a pickle store. That would be just extra work for them.

"They will," says he, sticking to his scheme, "if

we have better pickles to sell them than they can buy in the average grocery store."

"Pickles is pickles," says I.

"Like almost everything else," says he, as solemn and wise as an old owl, "there's a big difference in pickles."

"Yah," says I, "some are sweet and some are sour."

"I mean," says he, "that of pickles of a kind some are much better than others. Take your own mother's pickles for example. You must have noticed that they've got a better taste than boughten pickles. And that largely explains why a great many women prefer to make their own pickles. They want better pickles than they can buy. So how easy for us to build up our new business if we get the right kind of pickles to sell!"

I gave him a sad look.

"Poppy," I sighed, "you're too much for me."

"What do you mean?"

"As long as you're a boy," I advised, as a further effort to pull him down to earth, "why don't you be a boy? This Peanut Parlor stuff is out of your line, kid."

"I didn't say anything about a Peanut Parlor."

"Well, a Pickle Parlor is just as crazy. You can't make it work. For pickles are groceries. And the place to buy them is in a grocery store."

"Jerry, if you wanted to buy a good cheap stove poker, what store would you go to?"

"To the Stove-poker Parlor," says I, tickled over my own smartness.

"Be serious."

"Well," I complied generously, "I might try the ten-cent store."

"But a stove poker is *hardware*. So, if your argument holds good, ought you not to go to a hardware store?"

"Tra-la-la," says I. "Isn't it a beautiful day."

"The point is," says he, "that people will buy hardware in a novelty store, or, for that matter, anything in any kind of a store, if you make it an object for them to do so."

"Anyway," says I, yawning, "running a store is a man's job. So that let's us out."

But he was as unmoved as though he were the hill of Gibraltar itself, or whatever you call it.

"Of course," he reflected, referring to the suggested partnership, "it will be a fifty-fifty proposition."

Seeing that it was useless to argue with him further, I sort of resigned myself to my fate as his pickle partner.

"I have a hunch," says I, "that it's going to be a whole lot worse than that. A Pickle Parlor! We'll be the laugh of the town."

"The Wright brothers were laughed at when they tried to fly. And Edison was laughed at when he started working on his talking machine. The easiest thing some people can do is to ridicule any new idea that comes up. But we should worry how much the Tutter people laugh at us. To that point, I'd rather have them laugh at us than ignore us. For to be ridiculed is recognition of a sort."

"Help!" I cried, holding my head. "Get the dictionary."

That set Poppy to laughing. And if you could have seen him then as I saw him you would better understand why I like him so well. With all of his wise talk there isn't a boy in Tutter, where we live, who has more real he-kid fun in him than this long-legged, long-headed chum of mine. And that he has big ideas is, of course, the more credit to him. As he says, half of the fun of being a boy is getting ready early in the game to be a man. Take the stilt factory that I told about in the book, POPPY OTT'S SEVEN-LEAGUE STILTS. That *was* a big idea, let me tell you. Imagine two boys starting a real, honest-to-goodness factory! With a smokestack on the roof, and everything. When the brain storm first struck my ambitious chum I declared flat-footed that we couldn't do it. But old long-head said we *had* to do it, for already he had two big stilt orders in his pocket. On the strength

of these orders we borrowed money from the bank to get started. It was pretty tough sledding for us at first, and once we got a wallop that almost floored us. But Poppy is like a rubber ball: the harder he gets bowled over the higher he bounds on the comeback. Good old Poppy!

To-day the stilt factory that we started is a growing business. Mr. Ott runs it. And so spruce and businesslike is he that at sight of him it's hard to believe that only a short time ago he was a shiftless, no-account tramp. In the book, POPPY OTT AND THE STUTTERING PARROT, I told in detail how Poppy made his father settle down and get a job. So you see my chum deserves credit for that good piece of work, too. Oh, you've got to hand it to Poppy, all right. He knows his cauliflower, as the saying is. From which, no doubt, you'll gather that I wasn't half as reluctant to become his Pickle Parlor partner as I had let on. I just talked against him for fun. All the time that I was running his scheme down I was thinking of the fun we were going to have and the money we were going to earn. Money! What boy doesn't like to have money? And how much more it means to a fellow when he earns the money himself. Yes, sir, if old long-head wanted to start a Pickle Parlor or any other kind of a parlor I was with him till the cows came home. Of course, I had everything to

learn. But I could watch him. And at the very least I could dust off the pickles while he cleverly punched the cash register. Deep down in my heart I even confessed to myself that I was pretty lucky to have this chance of being his business partner, which shows how much I appreciate him. And it makes me happy to know that he feels the same way toward me. Two peas in a pod! That's what Dad calls us. But maybe, to better fit this particular case, I should make it two cucumbers on a cucumber vine! Huh?

Now that it was all settled in the leader's active mind that we were going to be the prosperous proprietors of Tutter's first and foremost Pickle Parlor, we did the squinting act up and down Main Street to find a suitable location for our young gold mine, thus getting track of an empty store building. It looked awfully big and roomy to me. I tried to picture in my mind what it would look like when we got it filled up with pickles. And my uneasy conclusion was that if we *did* succeed in filling it up with pickles we'd have enough pickles to feed the whole United States for the next sixty-seven years. Finding out who owned the empty building we trotted down the street to the Canners Exchange Bank, where we asked to see Mr. Foreman Pennykorn, the president.

Of the three Tutter banks Mr. Pennykorn's bank

is the smallest and shabbiest. It gets its name from the canning factory that he owns. And if it wasn't for this factory I dare say the bank wouldn't have any business at all. For people as a rule don't like to do business with that kind of a bank any more than they like to trade in a dingy, sleepy-looking store. I've heard it said that the Pennykorn family is one of the richest in the county. But old Mr. Pennykorn is too tight fisted to spend any of his money for adding machines and other up-to-date bank stuff.

Waiting outside of the president's office, at the orders of the grumpy, suspicious-eyed cashier, we heard voices through the unlatched door. Nor did we feel that it was our duty to stuff up our ears.

"And what price have you posted for early sweet corn?" we heard Mr. Pennykorn inquire, from which we gathered that he was talking with his son, Mr. Norman Pennykorn, who runs the canning factory.

"Nine dollars a ton."

"Too much; too much," came in a sort of petulant, disapproving voice.

"But the farmers won't sell for any less."

"Um . . . What's the Ashton Canning Company paying?"

"Ten-fifty."

"Fools! They could buy for less."

"The farmers aren't dumb. They know our price is too low. And as a result a lot of them, I've been told, are planning to haul their corn over to Ashton. It's only ten miles. And a difference of one-fifty a ton is a big item to them."

A chair creaked; after which we heard footsteps going back and forth.

"I told you, Norman, when that Ashton plant was built that we'd suffer from it. If we don't watch our steps they are going to seriously cut into our business."

"Well," came the grunt, "you won't help matters any by cutting the price on the farmers. For they're sore at us already."

"Um . . ." studied the crafty banker. "It might be wise for us to buy up this Ashton plant. That would give us control of the local bottom-land acreage. The farmers then would have to sell to us at our price. Otherwise they wouldn't be able to sell at all unless they shipped. And the most of them are too dumb to attempt a thing like that."

"But our canned-corn outlet doesn't justify operating another plant. We'd lose money."

"I've been thinking, Norman, that we ought to materially increase our pickle output. Our Dandy Dills went across fine. Very fine, indeed. The wholesale houses expressed disappointment at the early depletion of our stock. Considering the mat-

ter, I've come to the conclusion that the somewhat extraordinary acceptance of our Dandy Dills is due, not so much to the manufacturing processes, but to the cucumbers, themselves. Our bottom land has produced exceptional sweet corn. And I'm wondering if it can't be made to further produce exceptional cucumbers in large quantities. That is, cucumbers of improved texture and flavor. You probably grasp my point. If we can greatly multiply our pickle business, which seems entirely feasible to me, we would be justified in taking over the Ashton plant."

"For pickles?"

"Exactly. It is something for us to think about."

"After our marked success last summer with the new pickle line, I encouraged Mrs. O'Mally to increase her acreage this year. And the other day I talked with another farmer from down the river who has a big patch. He's feeling around for a market. So the prospects are that we'll quadruple our dill output this summer."

"Fine. Very fine. But don't pay too much, Norman. Have an eye to profits. The less we pay out the more satisfactory our profits will be. As a whole, this promises to be a very good year for us. And if we can clean up fifty thousand dollars we'll be in excellent shape to absorb the Ashton concern."

"And you really think we should cut the price on sweet corn?"

"It galls me, Norman, to have to pay nine dollars a ton. But, to take a broader view, it would be awkward for us, I imagine, to—ah—antagonize the farmers at this stage in our contemplated development. So we probably had better let the nine-dollar price stand. Or, if necessary, with the future in mind, I even would consent to raising the price to nine-fifty or nine-seventy-five. That will win the farmers' confidence. And at every opportunity you should talk with them guardedly about cucumbers. You might even contract for a limited acreage. By explaining that it is experimental cannage you can keep them from expecting too much. . . . By the way, what is the boy doing this summer?"

"Forrest? Oh, burning up gasoline mostly."

"You should put him to work in the factory. He should be learning the business. Idleness and ex travagance are twin evils, Norman. And I cannot countenance either, much less in the habits of my only grandchild."

Not particularly interested at first in this long-winded business conversation, we had pricked up our ears at the mention of pickles. For that was stuff in our line! It was a sort of coincidence, I told myself, that we should overhear their pickle plans so soon after our decision to start up a Pickle

Parlor. But I never dreamed that soon the two businesses, so to speak, would be kicking each other in the seat of the pants.

A sporty-looking roadster having pulled up in front of the bank, its owner, a boy of our age, now sauntered lordly-like into the lobby. Forrest Pennykorn is what I call a first-class snob. I never did get along with him at school, and probably never will, for the only way to keep peace with him is to toady to him, and that is something I won't do with any kid, rich or poor.

Getting his eyes on us the snappily-dressed young millionaire brought out a scowl. For he has about as much love for us as we have for him.

"Some one must have left the back door open," was his clever little slap at us, as he disappeared into his grandfather's office. "Hi, Grandpop. Hi, Pop. Why don't you turn on the electric fan? It's hotter than an oven in here."

"Not infrequently," was the banker's dry reply, "it is advisable to endure slight bodily discomforts in order to economize."

"That's all Greek to me. Say, Pop, can I have a ten-spot? I want to take a spin over to Ashton this afternoon."

"Forrest, your grandfather and I have just been talking about you. And we both feel that you're old enough to be of some help to me at the factory."

"What?"

"The business will be yours some day. And you ought to begin now to—"

A gust of wind having blown the door wide open, it was now closed with a bang, staying latched this time. And not knowing how much longer we might be kept waiting, Poppy got up, sort of impatient-like, and went over to the cashier's window.

"We're interested in Mr. Pennykorn's empty store building near the Lattimer meat market. Can you tell us what it rents for?"

"One hundred and twenty-five a month," snapped the cashier, a bit peeved, I guess, that we hadn't taken up the business with him in the first place.

"One hundred and twenty-five *dollars?"* says Poppy, drawing a deep breath.

The man nodded curtly, after which the president and general manager of Tutter's leading Pickle Parlor gave a sort of wilted laugh.

"I guess, Mr. Blynn, that's too steep for us."

A stoop-shouldered old man had come into the bank. And I noticed now that he was standing where he could listen. His face looked peculiarly familiar to me. But for the life of me I couldn't place him at the moment.

"Are you planning on starting up a store?" the cashier thawed out under the warmth of his own curiosity.

"A Pickle Parlor," says Poppy, who felt, I guess, that the sooner he started advertising the new business the better.

"A *what?*" the bank clerk stared.

"A Pickle Parlor."

"What in the name of common sense is a Pickle Parlor?"

"What is an ice-cream parlor?" countered Poppy.

"A place where you buy ice cream."

"Naturally. So a Pickle Parlor is a place where you buy pickles."

"I never heard of such a thing."

"I rather imagine," came modestly from the genius of Tutter's new enterprise, "that our Pickle Parlor will be the first of its kind in the United States. When completely organized it is our plan to sell all kinds of quality pickles—apple pickles, beet pickles and various mixtures. But at the start we will specialize in cucumber pickles. I hope you will give us a trial, Mr. Blynn. Pickles is pickles for the most part, but you'll always get preferred pickles when you deal with us. Even your wife, excellent cook as she no doubt is, will be unable to make better pickles than ours. And to serve with those tasty party sandwiches, which mean so much to an experienced hostess, who would want to use any pickle except the perfect pickles that are the fame of Poppy's Pickle Parlor? As a matter of

fact, we expect to get a corner on the whole pickle business of the town. And later on we may branch out and sprinkle a chain of Pickle Parlors all over the state."

"I swan!" the cashier stared. "I swan!"

A jeering laugh followed us out of the bank, for young Pennykorn had come out of his grandfather's office in time to overhear Poppy's pickle oration.

"Well," I grinned at my chum, when we were in the street, "we're getting a lot of that 'laughed-at' recognition that you talked about. So you ought to be happy."

"A Pickle Parlor!" smarty hooted after us from the door of his grandfather's bank. "A Pickle Parlor! Haw! haw! haw!"

"Jerry," came solemnly, "do you know what I wish?"

"That you could coax him into an alley and punch his face?"

"Oh, no! I wish I could make him come into our store and beg us to sell him some of our pickles."

"Which reminds me," says I, "that you haven't told me yet where you're going to get these wonderful pickles."

"That," says he, with a thoughtful look, "is still a puzzle to me."

"*Good* night!" I squeaked, with much the same feeling as though, having skidded off the moon, I

had landed kerflop! on the hard earth. "It's a good thing, I guess, that they didn't make us a special offer on that store. For we'd look cute trying to run a Pickle Parlor without any pickles."

CHAPTER II

OUR "SILENT" PARTNER

"OUR business career was kind of short and snappy," I told Poppy, when we had turned a corner out of sight of the Canners Exchange Bank where our enemy, Forrest Pennykorn, had just given us the horselaugh.

"How do you get that 'was' stuff?" says he. "We really haven't got started yet."

I had known, of course, that he would say something like that. For when he starts out to do a thing he usually sticks to it until he finishes it. That's the kind of a kid *he* is. But I pretended that I was surprised.

"What?" I squeaked, as we ran into a jam of people in front of the Parker grocery where a sale was going on. "Haven't you given up that scheme?"

There was a crash of glass on the concrete sidewalk.

"My pickles!" cried one of the shoppers, glaring at poor Poppy as though she was mad enough to snatch him bald-headed. "Stupid! Why don't you watch where you're going?"

The offender, of course, had an apology a mile long. Then, in his quick-minded way, he got down on his knees and began fingering the pickled cucumbers as they lay in a puddle of juice on the sidewalk, acting for all the world as though he were conducting a pickle post-mortem, or whatever you call it.

"Mrs. Clayton," he finally looked up with a long face, "you may not realize it, but this accident is nothing short of an act of Providence. And while it may seem to you that you have suffered a loss, you really are going to be benefited. The very fact that you made this purchase proves that you are a lover of good pickles. I say *good* pickles, for, as a pickle specialist, I can see that you bought the best pickles that the store had. Probably they are fairly good pickles, as pickles go. Because I am in the pickle business myself is no reason why I should run down anybody else's pickles. Yet, on the other hand, I feel that I have a right to uphold the superior quality of my own pickles. And it is of such pickles that I am going to make good your loss. Not *store* pickles, Mrs. Clayton, as we usually accept the term, but *home-made* pickles, of which the more you eat the more you want; pickles that you never tire of; pickles with the lasting, lingering taste; pickles with a skin you love to touch; pickles," the orator soared, like a rooster flopping

over a fence, "that please but never pucker. A wonderful treat is in store for you. And once you have been initiated into the dinner-time joys of perfect pickles, I hope you'll remember me, not as a blundering boy who bumped into you by accident, to the loss of your bottle of store pickles, but as the hand of Providence that led you into the light. Poppy's Pickle Parlor! Easy to remember, isn't it? If you'll say it over two or three times you'll never forget it. Poppy's Pickle Parlor! Which is all to the point, Mrs. Clayton, that whenever you are in need of pickles, the place to buy them, if you want the best, is at Poppy's Pickle Parlor, the home of perfect pickles."

Well, say! I never felt so foolish in all my life. Poppy is all right. He is a smart kid, in fact. And no doubt this new scheme of his was water tight. But it struck me that he was spreading the gab too promiscuously. Enough people would laugh at us, I figured, without him making a monkey of himself (and me, too!) in public.

"The first thing you know," I hinted, when we had escaped from the laughing crowd that had gathered around us as a result of the free show, "they'll be locking you up in a padded cell."

"What's the matter, Jerry?" he grinned, in perfect contentment with himself. "Don't you like my lingo?"

"You can't keep it up," I told him, "and get away with it."

"It's good advertising," he modestly bragged on himself.

"But what's the use," says I, "of letting on that we have a Pickle Parlor when we haven't?"

"A business is a business," says he, "from the time it's organized. And we've been organized for more than an hour."

"But we haven't any store. And you say yourself that you don't know where we're going to get our pickles."

"I know where we're going to get the first quart," he grinned.

I saw then that he was holding something back. Which was like him, of course! And so I was prepared for something of a surprise as I followed him down the street to his home, where he reappeared from the cellar with a jar of cucumber pickles, which, on sampling, I had to acknowledge were the swellest home-made cucumber pickles that I ever had set my teeth into.

"Who made 'em?" I smacked.

"That," says he, "is something I have yet to find out."

"Don't you know?" I stared.

He slowly shook his head.

"It may seem to you, Jerry, that I just jumped

into this Pickle Parlor scheme on a moment's notice. But it's a fact I've been twisting the scheme around in my head for the past two days. And what put it into my head in the first place was this jar of pickles. Pickles like these, I told myself, would make a storekeeper rich in no time, providing he had enough of them to sell. And what fun it would be, I thought, to run a store of that kind. A Pickle Parlor! The name popped into my head just like that," and he snapped his fingers in illustration. "But I ran up against a snag when I tried to find out who had made the pickles. I have them here, as you can see. But I don't know where they came from."

"But surely," says I, puzzled over his words, "they didn't drop out of the sky."

"Last Saturday," he explained, "the ladies of the Presbyterian missionary society held a food sale in Drake's store. And there is where I bought the jar of pickles. I didn't ask who made them, for I wasn't interested . . . then. And when I tried to find out later on no one seemed to know. First, I was sent to Mrs. Bowman on Elm Street. No, she told me, after tasting the pickles, they weren't out of her kitchen. Nor could she help me. But she'd like to buy some of the pickles, she said, if it turned out that there were more of the same kind for sale. I went to three women in turn. No success at all.

But here's an important point, Jerry: Every woman who sampled the pickles wanted to buy some. So you can see the big money that's waiting for us if we can find out who this unknown pickle genius is and win her over to our scheme."

There's nothing I like better than mystery stuff.

"What'll you give me," I laughed, "if I find out who the pickle maker is?"

"I'll make you president of the company."

"No," I shook my head, "that's your job. For it's your idea."

"Well, vice-president then."

"All we've got to do," I showed my stuff, "is to get a list of the women who contributed pickles to the church sale and then check off the names until we come to the right one."

"That would be fine if there was such a list. But there isn't, for I inquired. As I understand it, the newspaper invited people in general to bring cookies and other stuff to the sale, which explains how the pickles happened to be brought in. Evidently some one just walked in with them, and after setting them down quietly walked out again."

"Then," says I, as a second lead, "we'll advertise in the newspaper. Or if that doesn't do the trick, we'll make a house to house canvass."

It was close to eleven o'clock now. And thinking that maybe Mrs. Clayton would want her pickles

for dinner, we filled a bottle of the same size as the one that had been broken and hurried down the street to the factory district, where we saw young Pennykorn's classy car, together with several others, parked in a vacant lot across the street from the canning company's office. Just beyond was an old-fashioned house well shut in by untrimmed trees and ragged bushes, a familiar place to Poppy, for he had worked here painting porches when he first came to town. At sight of the sleepy-looking house it suddenly popped into my head who the old man was whom I had noticed in the bank. It was old Mr. Weckler, the widower who had so generously and unexpectedly put up the money for the big assembly cabin in our Boy Scout camp. I had seen him once or twice in camp. So in a way it was strange that I hadn't recognized him right off. Still, a fellow can't remember every face that he sees. I'll never forget the joy of the Scouts when the newspaper announced Mr. Simon Weckler's donation. And were the Tutter people ever surprised! For it was the general public opinion that on top of being something of a miser the old man hated boys, which goes to show how easily one can be misjudged.

The housekeeper's face broke into a smile when she saw us at the back door.

"I hardly knew whether to believe your silly talk

or not," she told Poppy, taking the pickles that we had brought her.

"Try one," beamed the pickle specialist, as he caught her looking curiously into the jar, "and if they aren't what I represented them to be I'll run down town and buy you a tubful of the other kind."

"Oh. . . ." she cried, biting into one of the pickles. "Aren't they perfectly delicious! Did your mother make them?"

Poppy shook his head.

"No," he explained quietly, "my mother is dead."

Here old Mr. Weckler, himself, pottered into the kitchen, thumping along with his heavy cane, a huge yellow cat tagging at his heels. At sight of us he gave a dry smile, which showed clearly enough that he hadn't forgotten about the pickle oration that our walking dictionary had so nobly squeezed out of his system in front of the cashier's window.

"Found a store yet?" the old man inquired.

"No, sir," was Poppy's polite reply.

"I was in the bank when you were there and overheard you inquiring about Pennykorn's empty building. Humph! If you would accept my advice don't rent from that man if you can possibly help it. Too grasping; too grasping," and the shaggy gray head waggled sharply in conclusion.

"I guess," laughed Poppy, "there's no danger of

us renting *any* building for one hundred and twenty-five dollars a month." Liking cats he got down on his knees. "Hello, Peter," he held out his hand. "Remember me, old boy?"

As though it did remember him, the cat came over and rubbed against him.

"Up, Peter," commanded the old man, pleased at the interest shown in his pet. "Show the boys what you can do. Up, I say," and the cat sat up as pretty as you please.

"You old tyke," says Poppy, affectionately petting the yellow head.

"He hasn't forgotten," says Mr. Weckler, "how you fished him out of that dry cistern and bandaged his foot."

"I see it's all well again."

"A trifle stiff in the joint, but otherwise as good as ever. . . How big a place do you figure you need for this Pickle Parlor of yours?"

"I imagine we ought to start up in a small way," says Poppy thoughtfully. "For the chances are we won't have much of a stock at first. In fact," came the laughing admission, "after supplying you people we have only seven pickles left. Nor do we know yet where more of the same kind are coming from."

Mrs. Clayton laughed when she heard about the unknown pickle genius. Then, at the old man's in-

vitation, we followed him into the back yard, where, almost hidden in a thicket of neglected apple trees, we were shown a small house on the order of a child's playhouse, but made full height, which we were told we could use for a store if it were big enough for us.

"Originally a summerhouse, I built it over to please my daughter," the old man told us quietly. And there was something in the tone of his voice that made us think that the memory of his daughter wasn't a happy one. "It's of no use to me now. As a matter of fact, this is the first time that I have been inside of it for years. For your purpose, of course, it would be better to move it to my vacant lot across the street from the canning factory."

Poppy fairly danced with joy.

"Why, there couldn't *anything* be better, Mr. Weckler. It fits our scheme to a 'T.' For like the scheme, itself, it's different. Everybody will notice it. And it's plenty big enough, too. We can build our shelves on the sides," he began to plan, "and put the counter back here. Of course," he ran off into a merry laugh, "it won't be a very *big* counter." Then he stopped. "But maybe," he looked up at the old man with his big solemn eyes, "we can't afford to pay you what it's worth."

"You paid for it," came shortly, "when you went down into the cistern to rescue my cat."

"But that wasn't anything. I'd do that for *any* cat."

I could see that the old man liked Poppy. For his eyes showed it.

"I dare say you would," he nodded. "Which is all the more reason why you're deserving of any help that I can give you. No, you needn't say any more about it. The playhouse is yours to take or leave, as you see fit. As for moving it onto my lot, if you decide to do that you can pay me five dollars a month."

"Only five dollars a month for the whole business?" cried Poppy. "That isn't enough. We expect to make a lot of money when we get organized. And I don't think it's right for us to fill our own pockets and not pay you what we should."

"Possibly," came the dry suggestion, "you would like to take me into partnership with you."

"Hot dog!" cried Poppy.

"Very well," the old man gravely accepted the honor. "You may call me your 'silent' partner, if you wish. Which means that you're to run the business as you see fit and I'm to look on. As for sharing in the profits, I'll take my pay in pickles."

"So many pickles as *that?*" Poppy looked his surprise.

"Oh," came dryly, "it may not be so terribly many. Probably not more than two or three quarts a month at the most."

CHAPTER III

WHOSE PICKLES

"WHAT's luckier than the left-hand foot of a tongue-tied graveyard rabbit?" says I to Poppy, when our "silent" partner had gone into the house to eat his dinner.

I thought at first that old long-face wasn't going to answer me, so busy was he building shelves and counters in his mind. But finally it percolated into his crowded cranium that I had asked him a question.

"What?" says he, deciding that shelf number six was a trifle too high and that the wrapping counter needed to be shoved a thirty-second of an inch to the left.

"A cat in a cistern," says I.

"Cuckoo!" was his lack of appreciation of my cleverness.

"I'm not talking about 'cuckoos,'" I threw back at him. "I'm talking about cats—k-a-t-z, cats. And the point is, that if Mr. Weckler's tomcat hadn't skidded into a convenient cistern, thus giving you a chance to do the hero stuff, our Pickle

Parlor might have cut its baby teeth in a dry-goods box instead of a juvenile bungalow. Hence the good luck to us, as I say. Oh, you needn't look so disgusted," I began to spar at him, "or the first thing you know I'll show you how easy a vice-president can take a mere president down and rub dirt on the end of his nose."

"Shut up," he laughed, "I'm busy."

"Don't take it so seriously, Poppy," I further kept at him. "For this isn't a morgue—it's a Pickle Parlor."

"To listen to you," was the nice little hunk of flattery that he shoved at me, "anyone would think it was a lunatic asylum."

I picked off some of his high-falutin' oratory.

"Poppy's petrified pickles," I swept the air with my arms. "The perfect pickles with a puckery past; the quicker you eat them the shorter you last." Then I let out a yip. "Look me over, kid," I strutted around. "I'm a real poet."

"Yah, a poet . . . but you don't know it."

"Say, Poppy?"

"Well, what now?"

"Have you got your private office picked out yet?"

"Sure thing," he grinned. "It's on the ninth floor."

"Toot! Toot!" says I, pretending that I was an

elevator. "Anybody going up to the president's office?" Then I took a lath that lay on the floor and smacked old doo-funny a sharp crack on the seat of the pants. "Look out!" I staggered, pretending this time that my arms were loaded full. "I just dropped a jar of pickled carpet tacks."

Poppy and I fool around that way a lot. It's kid stuff, I know. And kind of silly. But in a way it bears out that old saying of Dad's: Every day a little fun and a little business.

Having completed the entertainment, so to speak, I got down to business, making the suggestion that we paint the outside of our store yellow with green trimmings. The "yellow" would be the cucumber blossoms, I brilliantly explained, and the "green" would be the pickles. The inside was to be painted, too, but, of course, we couldn't do that until the shelves and counter had been made. Spick and span and nothing else but—that was our idea of what a store should be. And it was the right idea, too.

"How about a sign?" says I, as the self-appointed decorator. "Do you want me to paint that, too?"

"What are we going to put on it?" says Poppy.

"'Poppy's Pickle Parlor,' of course," says I, looking at him in surprise. "I thought that was all settled."

"But it's *your* Pickle Parlor," says he, "just as much as it's mine."

"Of course," says I, getting the point of his unselfishness. "But 'Poppy's Pickle Parlor' is a better name than 'Jerry's Pickle Parlor.' For the 'P' in Poppy sort of rhymes with the 'P' in pickles."

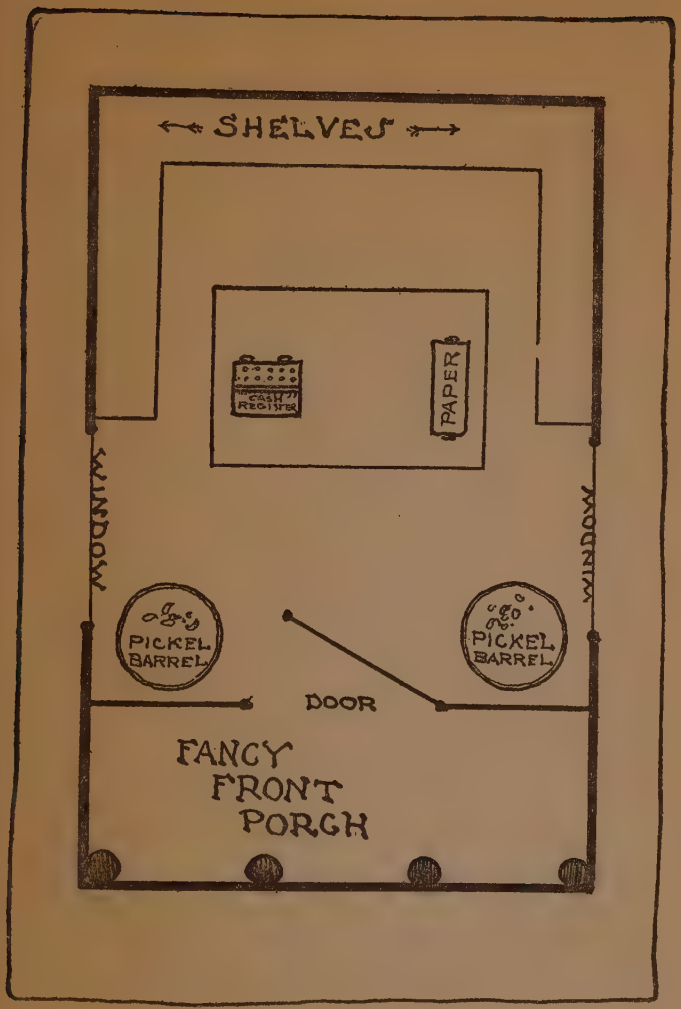
"Alliteration," old brain-bag swung in.

"What do you mean by that?" I cheerfully showed my ignorance.

"Using the three words, all beginning with 'P,' is what is called alliteration. You see a lot of it in advertising. In fact," he admitted, "that's where I got my idea."

Getting the measurements of our new store, which proved to be six feet wide by eight feet long, we made a diagram, or, as Poppy called it, a floor plan, a copy of which is printed on the opposite page. You may wonder where we expected to pick off a cash register. As a matter of fact, we didn't expect to own a cash register for a long time. But a floor plan, to use the leader's words, was intended to show everything *complete*. And that is why we put the cash register in ahead of time, along with the two prospective pickle barrels.

"Before we go any farther," says Poppy, "I think we better check up and see how we stand on the money question. For it will take a good bit of jack


SHELVES
CASH REGISTER
PAPER
WINDOW
WINDOW
PICKEL BARREL
PICKEL BARREL
DOOR
FANCY FRONT PORCH

to pay for the paint and shelf lumber. Then, too, we'll have to hire a house mover."

"It won't cost much," I grinned, "to move this house."

"Probably not. But we won't get the job done for nothing. How about putting in fifty dollars apiece?"

That was all right with me, I agreed. Then, as the lodge saying is, we adjourned, stretching our legs in the direction of home, having been reminded by the one o'clock factory whistles that we hadn't had dinner yet. Later we met in Mr. Thomas Lorring's bank where we opened a hundred-dollar checking account in the name of Poppy's Pickle Parlor, after which we ordered our lumber and paint, not forgetting to put an ad in the *Tutter Daily Globe*.

Mr. Lorring, you will remember, was the banker who helped us start up our stilt factory, out of which we made several hundred dollars. He sure used us fine. And that is why we went back to him.

Poppy is a regular little gee whizz when it comes to sawing and fitting. Boy, you should have seen the way those shelves danced into place! I ran a race with him, slinging yellow and green paint right and left, but he beat me by a mile. Still, if I could have added to the paint that I put on the

store what I got on the old overalls that Mr. Weckler had so wisely provided, I guess the race would have been a tie.

Throughout our afternoon's work the old man pottered here and there, silently taking in everything with a critical, interested eye. Mrs. Clayton, too, came out to see how we were getting along, bringing a big pitcher of lemonade. Um-yum! The best lemonade I ever tasted. Having lapped up two or three quarts, more or less, my painting speed increased thirty-eight strokes to the minute.

People living in small towns usually keep pretty close tab on their neighbors. So, after Poppy's two wild "pickle" spiels, first in the bank and again in front of the Parker grocery, it soon got noised about that a new local business was about to blossom forth. A Pickle Parlor! Kids who heard what we were doing came and rubbered at us over the fence that inclosed Mr. Weckler's neglected garden. And older friends of ours smiled at us when they met us in the street. The general opinion was, as I had told Poppy in the beginning, that such a store would fizzle out for want of business. Of course, there was a "secret" side to our plans that our friends didn't know about. And, to that point, I was to learn later on that my brainy partner had still other dope in his head that he hadn't dished out to me. Not for one instant had it occurred to me that some-

thing bigger and better equipped than an ordinary kitchen would be needed to cook the big wad of pickles that we hoped to sell. But, as I say, old Poppy already had dreams of a pickle factory in the back part of his mind. That kid! First it was stilts and now it was pickles. I never saw the beat of him. And what is more I never expect to.

At six o'clock we knocked off for the day, telling Mr. Weckler that we would be back the first thing in the morning. Mother nearly had a cat fit when she saw me. And no wonder! For so "stuck up" was I from my painting job that it took me an hour to get the green and yellow paint out of my hair. But what was that to upset a young business man!

At the first chance I got the evening newspaper away from Dad and skimmed up and down the columns to find our ad. Here it is:

WHOSE PICKLES

Something of great value was found in a quart jar of cucumber pickles purchased last Saturday at the Presbyterian missionary food sale in Drake's store.

Seven diamonds worth ten thousand dollars.

Were they *your* pickles? It will pay you to find out. Address, Box 9, *Tutter Daily Globe.*

I read the ad a second time, hardly able to believe my eyes. Seven diamonds worth ten thousand dollars! What in Sam Hill was Poppy's object in telling a lie like that? I had helped him write the ad; and it was my understanding that the "something of great value" that had been found in the pickles was the idea that my chum had of selling the pickles in great quantities, which, of course, would bring riches to the pickle maker. But there had been no mention of "diamonds" to me.

"Say, Jerry," my chum called up on the 'phone, "did you see our ad in to-night's paper?"

"Yes," I shot back at him, "and if you want to know the plain truth of the matter I don't think much of it, either. For it isn't on the square."

"They pulled a boner in the newspaper office," he then explained. "That line about the diamonds was lifted out of another article and put into our ad by mistake. The editor just told me so over the 'phone. I'm wondering now what the result of the mistake will be."

We weren't long in finding out. In the next two days we received sixty-three letters. Nor was it an easy matter for us to find out which one of these sixty-three pickle makers was the pickle genius of whom we were in search.

CHAPTER IV

A BUSY DAY

"THE mistake that our proof reader made in your ad," the newspaper editor admitted to us the following morning, "was nothing short of downright carelessness. Still," he laughed, handing us six letters, "it doesn't seem to have done you any harm."

It was explained to us then just how the mistake had occurred. Right beside our ad in the newspaper "form" was an article telling about a jewelry-store robbery. A line in this article had to be reset on the linotype machine. And in making the correction the proof reader got the new "slug," as the line of type was called, into the middle of our ad instead of in the robbery article, where it belonged.

Having been told by the editor that he would print the corrected ad free of charge, we thanked him and hurried out of the newspaper office, stopping at the first corner to see who our six letters were from.

"I saw your advertisement in to-night's *Globe*," wrote a woman on Oak Street. "I can easily identify my jar of pickles. My husband, who doubts

the truth of the advertisement, says, anyhow, that it couldn't have been our pickles in which the diamonds were found, for we never owned a diamond in all our lives except my engagement ring. Nevertheless, I would like to know for sure that mine isn't the lucky jar."

The next letter was from a woman by the name of Mrs. Hiram Springer.

"My attention was called this evening to your current advertising in our local newspaper. I certainly can't say that the diamonds are mine, granting that your story of finding them is true, for I never owned but one small diamond. Were the diamonds *in* the cucumbers, or just in the bottom of the jar? I'm wondering if I actually pickled jeweled cucumbers! Yet how *could* the diamonds have gotten into the cucumbers? But tell me, please, what you know. And I'm hoping, of course, that it was in my jar that the diamonds were found."

While it turned out that a lot of the women who wrote to us never had contributed pickles to the food sale, it isn't to be thought of them that they tried to cheat. Take the case of Mrs. Cook on South Main Street. She hadn't given the church people any pickles. But she *had* sent pickles to a number of her church-going neighbors. And so at sight of our ad her first thought was that possibly

the diamonds, which could have been in the green cucumbers, though not without mystery, had turned up in one of these scattered jars. Naturally, if such was the case she intended to press her claim. Another woman having had some pickles sent to her by an eccentric country relative jumped to the excited conclusion that "rich Aunt Hattie," as the relative was called, had put the diamonds into the pickle jar as a pleasing surprise. Some canned fruit had been stolen from her cellar, and how logical, was her quick conclusion, that a jar of "Aunt Hattie's pickles" had thus peculiarly found its way into the hands of the church people! You can see from this why so many letters had been written to us. No one who had any possible chance of laying claim to the diamonds stood idly by. For nothing was to be lost by writing; and there was a chance of great gain.

As we had to have pickles before we could open up our business, it was of more importance, Poppy said, to find out who the lucky pickle maker was than to finish painting our store, so, after a hurried trip to Mr. Weckler's house, to see if the paint was drying, we headed for 616 Elm Street to interview the first one of the six women who had written to us.

Mrs. Morgan was very eager to let us into her house when she found out that we had her letter.

But she got rid of us in a hurry when she learned the truth about the "diamonds." I couldn't see, though, what right she had to get out of patience with us and accuse us of trickery. But that just goes to show how unreasonable some people can be.

Our next stop was at Mrs. Hempline's house, where we were given much better treatment. Yes, was the cheerful, even eager admission, she had contributed pickles to the food sale. But we found on sampling her pickles that we were in the wrong house.

"Gosh!" says I, when we hit the street. "Did you see the look on her face when we backed out of the house? I bet anything she thinks we're cuckoo."

"How could she think different," grinned Poppy, "with you along?"

The balance of our calls were no more successful than the first two. Of the six women, three had contributed pickles to the food sale. But the pickles that we sampled weren't the pickles that we were looking for. In fact, at one house the pickles were no good at all. They tasted to me as though they had been put up in dish water.

"Hey!" a kid called to us across the street. "Mr. Stair wants to see you."

Hurrying to the newspaper office, we were given fourteen more letters and a telegram.

"Evidently," grinned the editor, "there's a lot of

people hereabouts who want to wear diamonds." Then he looked at us curiously. "By the way," he inquired, "what was it that you found in the pickles?"

"An idea," says Poppy.

"But you said it was something of great value."

"The right kind of an idea," says Poppy, "is frequently worth a lot of money."

"If it's news . . ." came the hint.

"I hope it will be big news some day," says Poppy, thinking of a new factory. "But I can't tell you about it now."

The editor continued to regard us curiously.

"I understand that you boys are going to start up a pickle store."

"A Pickle Parlor," came the polite correction.

The newspaper man laughed.

"Pickles? A Pickle Parlor? Evidently," he used his head, "this 'big idea' of yours has something to do with pickles."

"If you were to guess for the next thousand years," grinned Poppy, "you couldn't guess any closer than that."

"Aren't you the boy," the man's eyes then showed their admiration, "who brought the stilt idea to town?"

"We're the *boys,*" corrected Poppy, which shows what kind of a pal *he* is. Yes, sir, as I've said be-

fore, when the angels were putting old Poppy together they dumped in an extra gob of fairness. And then to sort of balance things they put in another extra gob of squareness, with the result that he's the *fairest* and *squarest* pal I ever had or ever hope to have if I live a million years.

"Wire collect complete detailed description of diamonds," our telegram read. And when we saw that it was signed by the Peoria chief of police you could have sliced off our eyes with a baseball bat.

"Wow!" says Poppy. "This is getting kind of complicated."

I have no better grown-up friend in all Tutter than Bill Hadley, the town marshal. So we went to him to find out what we should do about the telegram. Billy had a good laugh when he heard of our predicament. We weren't to worry about the telegram, he said. He'd take care of that matter for us.

"Evidently," was his opinion, "there's been a diamond robbery down in Peoria, an' that's why the chief wants a description of your diamonds."

"What if we get more such telegrams from Chicago and other cities?" says Poppy.

"Just bring 'em to me."

We put in the whole morning and the biggest part of the afternoon following up the letters that were mailed to us through the newspaper office. The

second batch of letters brought us no more success than the first six. At noon we were handed more. Twenty-six this trip. Can you imagine! We called on short women, tall women, young women, old women, pretty women, cross-looking women, skinny women, fat women, women who had lost their husbands, and a few who still were wishing. For by three o'clock a total of fifty-four letters had been received at the newspaper office. We sampled so many pickles that they began to stick out of our eyes. Toward the last the sight of a pickle made me gag. And this, by the way, got us into trouble. For one woman caught me turning up my nose at her pickles and landed on me with a broom.

"I'll teach you to ask me for pickles and then turn up your nose at them behind my back," she screeched. "Take that, you young whippersnapper. And *that* and *that*."

Poor me! The wonder is that I escaped without a broken neck. For that old girl sure could swat. As for Poppy, he never cracked a smile.

"Oof!" he gagged, when we were in the street. "I'm not surprised that you turned up your nose. For my part I almost turned up my toes. The worst pickles that I ever tasted in all my life."

"I'm beginning to wonder," says I wearily, when the street quit spinning around and around, "if we'll ever be able to find this wonderful pickle maker."

"We've got to," says he. "For if we don't our Pickle Parlor will be a fizzle. As I told you yesterday, the people will come to our store to buy better pickles. But we can't hope to attract them with ordinary pickles."

"Some of the pickles I've tasted to-day would kill a nanny goat with a cast-iron stomach."

"Which should make us realize all the more," says Poppy, "how popular our Pickle Parlor will be when we get properly organized."

I thought of something.

"Did you ever read the book about Dr. Jekyl and Mr. Hyde?" I inquired.

"Why do you ask that?" he looked at me curiously.

"Well, Dr. Jekyl got hold of a drug that changed him into Mr. Hyde, and then Mr. Hyde used another drug that changed him back into Dr. Jekyl. Everything was going along fine and dandy until the drug supply ran out. Dr. Jekyl couldn't find any more drugs with the right kind of stuff in them, which proved to him that the original drugs were a sort of accident. It may be the same with this one jar of pickles."

"That isn't impossible," says Poppy, "but I'm not going to let myself believe it."

By the time I got home there were things going on in my stomach that weren't right. Nor did it

help matters any when I tried to hold down the celebrating pickles with mashed potatoes and gravy.

Mother beamed at me across the supper table.

"Have some pickles," says she generously.

"No!" I cried, with a shudder. Pickles! The last thing I wanted was more pickles.

"Why, Jerry! What's the matter with you? You look white."

Dad glanced up from his newspaper.

"Too much candy, I bet a cookie. You shouldn't eat so much sweet stuff, Son," he lectured. "You're getting too big for that." Then, what do you know if he didn't shove a second dish of pickles at me! "Here, try something sour for a change. It'll do your stomach good."

Pickles! Suddenly I was caught in a whirl of pickles. Mixed pickles! Pear pickles! Apple pickles! Cucumber pickles! String-bean pickles! Peach pickles! Tomato pickles! They came at me with blood in their eyes. I tried to run. But I couldn't get away from them. Biff! The cucumber pickles soaked me a sledge-hammer blow on the end of the snout, while at the same time the string-bean pickles lifted up the tail of my coat and performed with perfect aim. Again I tried to run, but they got in front of me and cut me off. When I fell they landed on top of me. I saw I was a goner. And then—

Sort of coming back to earth, as it were, I found Mother steadying me.

"I'll help what's left of him to bed," I heard her tell Dad, "while you get the scoop shovel and clean up."

CHAPTER V

BUTCH MC'GINTY

I ALMOST died. But when I got all ready to do it, sort of, with Dad flying around like a rooster with its head cut off and Mother rubbing my stomach with a hot cloth that looked to me like an old woolen petticoat, Doc Leland bustled into the house with his pill case, out of which he mixed up some dope that did the miracle, as the saying is. And how wonderful it was to know, in the relief that Doc's pills and a hot-water bottle brought to me, that I was going to have the chance, after all, of helping Poppy run the Pickle Parlor.

"Let this be a lesson to you," lectured Doc, oggling me through his big nose glasses, "an' don't make a pig of yourself the next time you happen to sneak up on an unchaperoned pickle dish."

"Pickles!" I gagged . . . and you should have seen Dad jump for the basin! "I never want to eat another pickle as long as I live."

Poppy, the big monkey, came in the next morning with a hunk of cauliflower tied up in fancy ribbons like a sick-room bouquet.

"When you get through with it," he grinned, "your ma can pickle it."

"Stop!" I shuddered. "Talk of anything else but pickles."

"Say, Jerry," he earnestly leaned over the bed, "I've got some news for you. We had a burglar in our house last night."

"What?" I cried, staring at him.

"I thought during the night that I heard a noise in the cellar. But laying it to the cat, I didn't get up, though now I wish I had."

"But what would a burglar be doing in your cellar?" I further stared at him.

"That's the queer part. Nothing was taken. But every jar of pickles that we owned was opened and the pickles dumped into a pile in the middle of the floor."

Again I raised the "Stop!" signal on him.

"Make it ketchup," I grimaced.

"Come to think of it," he laughed, "it was ketchup. But I'd like to have you tell me," he went on, serious again, "why a burglar should break into our cellar and destroy our canned pick—I mean our ketchup."

As I have written down in other books, mentioned in the preface of this book, I have had a good bit of experience solving unusual mysteries. At one time I really called myself a Juvenile Jupi-

ter Detective. That was in my "Whispering Mummy" book. So I'm right at home on the "mystery" dope.

"The burglar was looking for something," says I, showing my stuff. "And if you're half as smart as I think you are you ought to guess what that something is."

"Diamonds?" says he.

"Nothing else but."

"I thought of that. But it was such a *crazy* theory that I quickly dropped it. In the first place there are no diamonds. And if there had been, certainly, after finding them, I wouldn't have been dumb enough to put them back in the pickle jar."

"Maybe," says I, so interested now that I didn't care a rap whether he said "pickles" or not, "the burglar thinks you have diamonds in all of your jars."

"Then he must be cuckoo."

"Do you suppose," was the view I then took, trying to find a deeper object for the queer act, "that there's mystery going on that we don't know about?"

"What do you mean?"

"There was a diamond robbery in Peoria. Bill Hadley said so. And maybe one of the thieves told his accomplice that he'd hide the booty in Tutter in somebody's cellar. The fellow you heard could

have been the accomplice trying to find his share of the hidden diamonds."

I didn't mean it, of course. It was pure nonsense. But you should have seen Poppy's face!

"I think," says he, "that you'd better have Doc Leland come back and doctor your head as well as your stomach."

"Just the same," I laughed, "it was the diamonds that brought the burglar to your home. It couldn't have been anything else. Reading our ad, he found out somehow that you were back of it, and naturally his idea was that you had the diamonds in the house. So he tried to find them. It was queer, of course, that he searched for them only in the cellar. But that's nothing. The main point is, will he come back again, hoping for better luck, or won't he?"

"Everybody in town ought to know by this time that there are no real diamonds."

"Evidently your burglar didn't know the truth last night. . . . Did you tell Bill Hadley?"

"Not yet"

"Bill is pretty smart at keeping an eye on strangers. And he'll know if there's any suspicious characters hanging around town."

I was then told by my chum that he had gotten nine more letters at the newspaper office. We went through these together. And later Poppy did the

usual calling and pickle-sampling act. But to no success.

I hardly knew what to think. It didn't seem possible to me that any woman in Tutter could have missed seeing our ad. Then, too, there had been a lot of talk among the women about the "lucky pickle jar," which all helped to make the news general. Yet, in all of our calls we hadn't found the slightest trace of the particular pickles of which we were in need.

Could it be, as I had told Poppy that the one jar of pickles that had cranked up his imagination to such rosy Pickle Parlor dreams had been an accident, like the original Dr. Jekyl and Mr. Hyde drug? And had we unknowingly talked with the woman who had made the pickles? If such was the case, certainly we ought to step on the gas and find her. For having once done the job right, even though by accident, she probably could learn to repeat. A little experimenting would do the trick.

I didn't see any more of Poppy until evening. He had put in the afternoon slinging paint, he told me. Having finished the store-painting job, both inside and out, everything was now as slick as a button, and all we had to do was to wait for the paint to dry, which wouldn't take more than two or three days.

"I even painted the sign," he laughed. "Gee, you

ought to see it. It looks like a million dollars."

"But, Poppy," says I, sort of perplexed, "what are we going to do with the store if we fall down on finding this star pickle maker? Had you thought of that?"

"Before I give up," says he, "I'll borrow every pickle recipe within ten miles and try them out myself."

Which was a perfectly sound scheme, of course . . . granting that we had oceans of time. But here we were within a week or ten days of heavy cucumber harvest.

No, we never could hope to get the necessary pickle supply started, for early business, by going about it in that way. And in twisting the matter around in my mind I began to wonder if we couldn't sort of save our proposed business by changing it into a Popcorn Parlor. We could sell peanuts, too; even put in a stock of chewing gum and candy. Of course, a store like that hadn't the originality, as you call it, of a Pickle Parlor, and hence wasn't as exciting to think about. But it would be a store—*our* store, in fact. And as long as the business was ours what difference did it make to us what we sold? Certainly, was my further thought, it would be no trick to change the sign from "Poppy's Pickle Parlor" to "Poppy's Popcorn Parlor."

Doc Leland had dished out the order that I was

to stay in bed. But I got up and dressed the following morning, feeling quite like myself again except that the thought of pickles still gagged me. The letters now had stopped coming in. So we hadn't any of the follow-up work to do. Nor was there anything we could do at Mr. Weckler's house except to walk around our green and yellow store and admire it. Boy, we sure were the proud little peacocks. *Our* store! Of course, we didn't own it; and, to that point, Mr. Weckler hadn't told us just how long we could use it. But he was our "silent" partner. And having a warm interest in us, as we could see, our opinion was that he would let us use the store as long as we needed it.

That morning we took a trip into Zulutown, which is the name that the Tutter people have for the tough end of town beyond Dad's brickyard, to talk with Mr. Butch McGinty about moving our store. I suppose Mr. McGinty has some other front name besides "Butch." But that's the only name I ever heard him called by. And it sure fits him to a "T" —big ox that he is, so hairy and red-nosed. An old bachelor, his home in Zulutown is the dirtiest place I ever set eyes on. He does his own cooking and housekeeping. It isn't anything surprising to go into his house and find the cat sleeping in the middle of the dinner table. I'd hate to live that way.

Mr. McGinty's business is "towing," for which

purpose he keeps a mule. He also moves small houses and hauls ashes. If you live near a canal you know what I mean by "towing." It is much the same as house moving, only the thing that is "towed" isn't a house, but a barge or flatboat. With all of his "towing" and house-moving work old Butch hasn't much to do, for in a small town like Tutter the houses usually are left where they're built. But when a job of this kind bobs up he usually gets it.

We found him in the kitchen baking cookies.

"Howdy, boys," he welcomed us, acting so friendly about it that I could almost imagine that he knew we had a job for him. "Jest dump that stuff off them chairs," he pointed, "an' make yourselves homely." Then he gave a leap for the oven, which was smoking out of its cracks like a volcano with a dozen craters. In his hurry to throw open the oven door he forgot to grab a cloth holder . . . and thus burning his fingers maybe you think he didn't explode! "Drat the luck! That's the second batch of cookies that I've burnt to a crisp. Jest look at 'em!" and he dumped the junk into the middle of the kitchen floor.

You can't be around Mr. McGinty without grinning. For he's funny. And we grinned all the harder when he scratched his head with the cookie cutter.

"This thing of bein' a bachelor," he complained, disgusted with his poor work, "hain't what it's cracked up to be. Fur it never was intended nohow that a man should be his own cook. *Me?*—outside of makin' pickles an' pancakes I kain't cook fur two cents. As fur sweepin' an' dustin', they's a way of doin' it proper, I s'pose, but I've never yet found it."

"Why don't you get married?" laughed Poppy.

That brought a snort.

"An ol' fool like me?" he ran himself down, though with twinkling eyes. "They hain't nobody as would have me."

I wanted to ask him how about the Widow O'Mally who lives in the old Weir house in the river bottoms. For everybody in Tutter knows that he shines around her every chance he gets. Dirty as he is in his own home, he's some foxy old sheik, let me tell you, when he gets dolled up in his sparking clothes. But, of course, he wasn't going to admit any of that stuff to a couple of boys.

He had better luck with the next batch of cookies.

"Jest help yourselves, boys," was the liberal invitation, as he scooped the cookies out of the black pan with a pancake turner that was used other times for swatting flies. "I know how boys is," he added, wiping off a cookie that had rolled across the floor. "You kain't git 'em filled up. I was that way, too,

when I was your age. So don't be bashful. Jest pitch in an' help yourselves. When I've got company I like to see 'em eat."

We did the mannerly thing, of course, each of us taking a cookie and thanking him for it. Nibbling at mine, sort of gingerly, I found it wasn't half bad.

Well, we came to terms about the house moving. It would cost us ten bucks, Butch said. Poppy tried to bring him down to nine dollars, figuring, I guess, that every dollar saved was a dollar earned, but, no, the house mover held out, ten dollars was his price, and we could take it or leave it.

Here I ran to the barn to say hello to Jerusalem, the "tow" mule, for we're old friends. I wasn't there very long. And when I joined Poppy in the street I noticed that he was acting sort of peculiar-like.

"Say, Jerry," says he, "are you prepared for a big surprise?"

"What's wrong now?" says I.

He fished something out of his pocket.

"Oof!" I turned up my nose. "Another pickle."

"Mr. McGinty treated me to pickles while you were outside. And as they didn't look so worse I bit into one. Before that, as you may remember, he had said something about making pickles. But it never had percolated into my bean that—"

I saw what was coming.

"My gosh!" I squeaked, staring at him in sudden dizziness. "Is *he* the pickle genius that we've been searching for?"

"There can be no doubt of it. I ate seven of his pickles. Wonderful! He had given six quarts to the church people, he told me, as they always hired him to haul their ashes." From the look on the other's face I could imagine that he had in his mind a picture of a kitchen cluttered with cobwebs, with dirty walls and a dirtier stove. "I'm beginning to wonder," says he, looking dazed, "where we're going to come out."

CHAPTER VI

POPPY'S "AUNT JEMIMA" SCHEME

In our search for the pickle genius we hadn't dreamed for the tail end of a second that any one short of a first-class cook had made the poochy pickles. And we had sort of pictured in our minds a spotless kitchen, puddled with sunshine, with a line-up of shiny aluminum kettles on the shelves, clever little ruffled doo-dads at the windows, a gurgling canary, and, to finish off, an old rag rug of many colors in the middle of the kitchen floor.

With all this junk in our minds, consider, then, the shock to us of learning that the pickle genius was no other than old Butch McGinty. The Tutter mule driver! Wow! As the saying is, we were completely flabbergasted.

For we realized, of course, that the one thing we couldn't do would be to popularize old Butch's pickles in Tutter. Without a doubt they were the most wonderful pickles that ever swam around in a canning jar. But, even so, who among the Tutter people would want to eat them? Certainly, no one who knew the mule driver, himself.

Our pickle ship having gone on the rocks, as it were, I hastened to comfort Poppy with the suggestion that our store could easily be changed over into a Popcorn Parlor. So we really weren't out anything except some shoe leather and the cost of our newspaper ad.

But instead of falling on my neck in grateful appreciation he hoisted up the coat tails of my scheme and gave it a swift kick.

"I graduated from popcorn two years ago," says he, thus reminding me that it was from selling popcorn that he had gotten his nickname.

But I dug in.

"Popcorn, peanuts and chewing gum," I recited.

"Pickles," says he, "and nothing else but."

"Poppy," I then lit into him, "you're a bullhead."

"Just so you don't call me a crab," he laughed.

You can't very well scrap with a chum who sort of pokes fun at himself instead of handing it back, so I shut up. Dog-gone *him!* If he thought for one instant that he could sell old Butch's pickles in Tutter let him go ahead and try it. He'd wish in the end that he had listened to me.

"Of course," says he, sort of reading my thoughts, "I realize that pickles made in Mr. McGinty's house won't sell. But we can have them made some place else. All we've got to do is to borrow his pickle

recipe. And then your mother, or any other woman, can do the trick."

"Some one tap me on the dome with a pile driver," says I. "I never thought of that."

"Then it's decided," grinned old heavy-brain, "that we're going to stick to pickles and forget about the peanuts and chewing gum?"

"Pickles it is, kid."

But we struck a snag when we tried to separate old Butch from his choice recipe. Nothin' doin', he said. The recipe was a secret. And much less than give us a copy of it, he wouldn't sell us a copy for a thousand dollars.

"How would it be," Poppy then suggested, "if we used your recipe and paid you a royalty?"

Butch knew a lot of things, but it was mostly about mules.

"A which?" says he.

"A royalty."

"What's a royalty?"

"We use your recipe. See? And having made a lot of pickles we sell them. All right. Every time we take in ten dollars we put nine dollars into *our* money box and one dollar into *your* money box. The money is your royalty—or, in other words, your pay—for letting us use your recipe."

"Kain't do it," he again turned us down.

"Why not? Isn't ten per cent enough for you?"

"A promise is a promise."

"Meaning which?" says Poppy.

"As I told you, the recipe is a secret. An' when it was given to me I was made to promise that I'd never let it git out of my hands."

I quickly got the leader's ear.

"Find out who gave him the recipe," I whispered.

But did we put anything over on old Butch? Not so you could notice it. Instead of dishing out to us the hoped-for answer, he started talking about the time his mule rolled in a box of mortar and lost all its hair.

There was a "do-or-die" look on Poppy's face.

"We've got to have pickles," says he.

"Wa-al?"

"And if you won't let us have your recipe, or tell us where you got it, the only thing left for us to do is to hire you."

"Meanin' that you want me to work fur you?"

"Exactly."

"Makin' pickles?"

Poppy nodded.

"Um. . . . My business is towin', not pickle makin'."

"You may find," says Poppy, "that you can make more money pickling than towing. For what you take in from towing isn't all profit. The wear and tear on your outfit is considerable."

"They hain't no wear an' tear on a mule."

"Every time your mule shakes its tail," says Poppy, seriously, "a certain amount of physical energy is used up. And to supply this energy you've got to buy corn and oats. The more tail shaking, naturally the more oats. That is what I call the expense of upkeep. Or, in other words, the expense of wear and tear."

Old Butch was staring now. For this "wear and tear" business, as applied to his mule, was a new wrinkle to him.

"I swan!" he exploded. "What do you want me to do, tie a flatiron to my mule's tail so he kain't shake it?"

"The point is," Poppy galloped along, "that you can turn Jerusalem out to pasture if you work for us, and nature's grass will foot the wear and tear bill. Then all you make will be profit."

"I swan!" came again.

"The most we can afford to pay you," says Poppy, getting down to brass tacks, "is three-fifty a day. Nor would we want to pay you any less, for we're going to keep you on the jump."

As I have written down, Butch's jobs, both towing and house moving, are kind of few and far between. So he hadn't any thought of turning us down.

"Um . . . Three-fifty a day, you say."

"Exactly."

"Meanin' three dollars an' fifty cents?"

Poppy nodded.

"Three dollars and fifty cents," says he, "and without any wear and tear."

The gray eyes narrowed.

"Got plenty of money?"

"Plenty," says Poppy.

"When do I start in?"

"To-morrow morning."

"An' you're sure you've got plenty of money?"

Poppy laughed.

"If it'll ease your mind any on that point we'll write you out a three-dollar-and-fifty-cent check every night at quitting time."

The old man let out his hairy neck.

"A *check?* Be you got a check book?"

"Of course," says Poppy. "That's a necessary part of running the business."

"I swan! Boys runnin' 'round with check books, when, gol ding it, I hain't even got one myself."

I jumped onto Poppy when we were outside.

"You sure are dumb."

"What's wrong now?" came the grin.

"To think that you should go and hire *him.*"

"I had to in order to get pickles."

"But you said yourself that no one in Tutter would eat his pickles."

"I said," came the correction, "that pickles made in his home wouldn't sell."

"If it's your scheme," says I, "to have him make the pickles some place else, they'll still be his pickles. And that will queer them. For everybody who knows him will take it for granted that the pickles aren't clean."

"But, Jerry, they *will* be clean. For we'll watch him like a hawk."

"It won't work," I shook my head.

The leader laughed. And right away I saw that he had something up his sleeve.

"Say, Jerry," says he, "did you ever notice the picture of Aunt Jemima on the pancake flour?"

"Sure thing. But what's Aunt Jemima got to do with our pickles?"

"We all know that Aunt Jemima is just a made-up character. The same as the Cream of Wheat man. As I understand it, such characters are used in advertising and selling to give the product a sort of personal touch. Just to look at the big grin on Aunt Jemima's face convinces us that her pancakes are good. So we are led to think of *good pancakes* instead of flour. Which is all to the point that if we put this 'Aunt Jemima' scheme to work in our own business our customers will be led to think of *good pickles*, and the question of who made them may never come up."

That kid! If he isn't the limit. The schemes in his head are thicker than mice in a corncrib. If something bobs up to cripple one scheme he drags out another. And if that one gets paralysis, or the chilblains, he has still a third. To tell the truth, this 'Aunt Jemima' stuff was all Greek to me. But what of that? If he had the nerve to tackle it, and take the responsibility, certainly I ought to be willing to stand back of him and help him.

The decision having thus been arrived at that Aunt Jemima was going to do some pickling as well as pancaking, we shook hands on it, for good luck, and then set out to buy a train-load of cucumbers.

CHAPTER VII

MRS. O'MALLY'S PECULIAR FRIGHT

Our state geographies tell us that thousands of years ago the valley in which our town is located was the channel of a gigantic river that carried off the huge overflow of the Great Lakes. As I understand it Niagara Falls wasn't doing business in those dim and distant days. It would be interesting to know just why the overflow stream got tired of the old channel and started a new one. And, to that point, what a bully sight the old stream must have been. Certainly, if it were as deep as our sandstone bluffs are high it was *some* river.

To-day the farmers raise corn on what used to be the bed of the big river. It is from this rich "bottom land," as we call it, that the Tutter Canning Company gets the most of its sweet-corn supply. And it was into this farming section, so familiar to us, that Poppy and I now turned our noses to see about buying cucumbers.

Going south on River Street as far as the river itself, a sluggish shrunken stream as compared to what it used to be, we turned to the right into a

dirt road. The river on one side of us and the cornfields on the other side were mostly hidden by horse weeds three times our height. Pretty tall horse weeds, huh? Well, if you ever come to Tutter in the summer time I'll show you some pretty tall corn, too.

After a walk of two miles or more on the dusty dirt road we came within sight of a two-story stone house. Not only was it a very old house, with walls two feet thick, as I very well knew, but it was queer-shaped, with a steep roof. High above everything else was a chimney that for size had it on any house chimney for miles around. It was six sizes too big for the work it had to do, but, of course, having been built when the house was put up it never had been changed.

It was to this lonely country place that Mrs. Cora O'Mally had moved when her Tutter house burned down, which fire I remember well, for that was the night I swallowed a button that had gotten into my bag of peppermint candy by mistake. As the insurance had run out on her house, the widow couldn't rebuild. But when the Tutter people heard that she was planning to move into the old Weir house in the river bottoms, a place that had been deserted for years and, in consequence, was almost a wreck, money was quickly raised with which the house had been fixed up. I might say here that a

certain young gink by the name of Jerry Todd had helped to smash the old doors and windows. For an old-time deserted house always attracts boys. And of this particular house a lot of queer stories were told. Holdups; bloody battles; even murder. In fact, a number of superstitious people, believing in ghosts, said at the time Mrs. O'Mally moved into the old house that she was foolish. It was no place to live, they declared.

To show you how a hard-working woman can fix up a place, the yard, as we saw it to-day, was grassy instead of weedy, with beds of blooming flowers sprinkled here and there. Vines performed on strings at the two porches. And another larger vine with sharp fingers had clawed its way up the stone wall to the roof.

Mrs. O'Mally was in her big cucumber patch back of the house. We could see her broad-brimmed straw hat. There were smaller bobbing hats, too, which told us that the pickle woman, as she was called in Tutter, had already put a number of young pickers to work.

"Unfortunate indeed is the aged body who has to raise cucumbers for a livin'," she straightened and drained the sweat from her blistered face as we stopped beside her. " 'Tis hard work," she added, with a deep, weary sigh. "An' the wonder to me is that me ould back doesn't give out entirely."

"You surely have enough of them," laughed Poppy, looking over the big patch, now in its third year.

"Enough, did ye say? Sure," came the tired smile, "I could fill all the pickle jars in New York City an' Chicago put together. There's hundreds of bushels. An' with the job of pickin' 'em, 'tis mighty glad I am," she beamed at us in her kindly way, "to have the help of two more b'ys of your size."

I told her that instead of having come to pick for her, as I had done the first summer she lived here, we had come to buy. As pickle manufacturers we might want thirty or forty bushels, I said, talking big. And having ordered four bushels as a starter, at two dollars a basket, we followed her to the house and wrote out a check.

"You haven't told me," says she curiously, sipping a glass of cold water, "who's goin' to do the picklin' for ye."

"Aunt Jemima," laughed Poppy, who, I might say, having but recently come to Tutter, never had been in the stone house before.

Mrs. O'Mally's face showed plainly enough that she didn't know who "Aunt Jemima" was.

"Don't you remember," I put in with a grin. "Aunt Jemima is the colored lady who makes the swell pancakes. She's going to work for *us*, too."

That, of course, puzzled her all the more. But however curious she was we couldn't very well tell her the truth.

Though it was blistering hot in the sun the house was cool, largely on account of its thick walls, I suppose. So, seated comfortably, we were in no particular hurry to leave. Besides, not having forgotten that Mrs. O'Mally usually kept a supply of swell cookies on hand, it might pay us, I figured, to sort of stick around.

Suddenly something tipped over in the cellar. At the sound the woman screamed, her hands clutching the front of her dress. And turning to us, as white as chalk, I saw, too, that she was trembling from head to foot. Scareder eyes I never expect to see.

"There's some one down there," I cried.

"The cat," she says, getting quick control of herself. "Come," she seemed anxious to get rid of us. "Let's go outside."

"What the dickens? . . ." says Poppy, looking back at the house from the dirt road. "Do you suppose she's got a prisoner down there?—or that some one is hiding in the house?"

"Maybe it was the old river pirate," I joked.

"Who?"

"Old Peg-leg Weir." Then remembering that he wasn't posted on the strange history of the old place, I explained: "He's the man who built the

house in the first place. Didn't you notice how queer it is?"

"I saw that it has unusually thick walls."

"Yes," says I, "and the farther down the walls go the thicker they get."

"What do you mean?"

"Well," I countered, "if you were a river pirate, and liable to be surprised any minute by a posse, wouldn't you like to have plenty of secret doors to jump through?"

"Do you mean to say that there are secret doors in the cellar walls?"

"That's the story."

There was a doubting laugh.

"You'll be telling me next that there's a ghost, too."

"Sure thing," says I cheerfully. "That was what we heard."

"Cuckoo!"

I then told my chum the complete story of the old house as the tale had been handed down to me —how old Peg-leg Weir and his band had preyed on the early river packets, from one of which they had taken a big treasure in gold that was being brought up stream from St. Louis. Then had come the death of the pirate chief, at the hands of an angry posse, after which the band had been scattered.

The pirate's treasure, I wound up, never had been lifted, but lay exactly where its rascally owner had hidden it. There were secret rooms under the queer house, I said, and hidden doors in the stone walls. It also was reported that there was a hidden tunnel through which the pirate and his band had carried their stolen gold from the river into the secret cellars.

"But tell me," says Poppy, sort of pulling the story to pieces in his mind, "if this is all true, how does it come that the old house wasn't long ago torn down? For that would have proved or disproved the story of the hidden rooms."

"People were scared of the ghost."

"Bunk!"

"On rainy nights," says I, "is when it usually comes out. For it was on a rainy night that old Peg-leg Weir was drowned."

"Drowned? I thought you just said he was shot by a posse."

"That's *one* story. The other one is that he was drowned in his bed. You see," I ran off into my usual nonsense, "he slept in the attic. There was a knothole in the roof. And rather than have the rain beat on his face as he lay in bed he shoved his peg-leg into the hole. The rain swelled the wooden leg so that it stuck tight. And the leg being hollow, the water ran down inside of it,

as though through a spout, and drowned him."

"I'd as soon believe that story," laughed Poppy, "as the other one. Ghosts! Pooh! What we heard in the house wasn't a ghost. Nor was it a cat, either."

"Maybe," was my further nonsense, "Mrs. O'Mally has a new husband. And she's modestly keeping him out of sight."

"Shall we break the news to Mr. McGinty?" grinned Poppy.

"I guess," says I in good sense, "we'd better keep our mouths shut. For whatever it was that we heard it's none of our business."

"What puzzles me," says Poppy, "is the way the woman acted. The noise wasn't a surprise to her. Yet, if she knew what caused it, why was she so scared?"

That *was* queer, I agreed.

CHAPTER VIII

READY FOR BUSINESS

We weren't so fed up on business stuff that we had forgotten how to be boys, with a liking for the kind of fun that is particularly boys' fun. So, as it was still early in the afternoon, and there was nothing special for us to do in Tutter, anyway, we headed for the river to do the usual midsummer "high-dive" and "who-can-bring-up-the-most-mud" stuff.

Across the river we could see the high sandstone bluffs, in the ravines and canyons of which are numerous caves, some of which are fairly good size. It's odd, in a way, that there should be any "wild" land in a section so completely crisscrossed with hard auto roads as La Salle county. But if you could see how deep and dangerous some of the river canyons are you'd understand why so few people go there.

Dressing after our peachy swim, I got my eyes on an old log raft that had lodged in the willows. There is only one thing that a raft is good for, but

when I tried to show my chum what that something was I had the bad luck to skid into the river, clothes and all.

And what gave Poppy all the more chance to hoot at me was the smart gab that I had dished out to him about "Washington crossing the Delaware." As a matter of fact,, if I hadn't acted the monkey with my "posing" stuff I wouldn't have ended up with a wet shirt tail. And what was even worse, my pants accidentally burned up when we built a fire to dry them.

But rather than stick around here until dark, I started for home in a headless and bottomless barrel that Poppy had found on the river bank. It was fun at first. That is, I tried to let on that it was fun. For lots of times when a fellow does that he can take the gloom out of a bad predicament. But with slivers puncturing me at every step I soon got tired of it. Besides, this was no way for me to hit town. If the Tutter kids spotted me they'd start rolling me around as sure as pop. And how lovely for me without any pants on!

"I'm going back to Mrs. O'Mally's," I told Poppy. "And if I can't do any better I'll borrow a nightgown."

Suddenly we heard the muffled thump-thump-thump of an approaching motor car. And having no particular desire to be act "A" in the free vaude-

ville show, as it were, I frisked myself, barrel and all, into a convenient cornfield.

Nearer and nearer came the auto. Then it stopped. Taking a guarded peek I saw that it was one of the canning company's trucks. And who do you suppose was jacking up one of the hind wheels? No one but little cutie, himself.

"Got a puncture?" I heard Poppy inquire pleasantly.

"Huh! Is it any of your business?" the hot-faced worker looked up with a scowl.

"Makes you sweat, huh?" was Poppy's further pleasant contribution to the conversation.

"Aw, shut up."

Having raised the wheel, the worker almost dislocated a lung trying to loosen the rim.

"Aren't you afraid you'll break it?" purred Poppy.

"I'll break your neck if you don't shut up."

The rim loosening suddenly, sweaty-face landed on the back of his neck in the dusty road. But he was up like a flash.

"If you laugh," he screeched, grabbing a hammer, "I'll soak you."

"I don't see anything to laugh at," says Poppy as sober as a deacon. "Did you hurt yourself?"

Smarty's eyes didn't lose any of their hatred.

"If it's time for you to go," he shoved out, "don't let me detain you."

"I was just wondering," says Poppy earnestly, "if I could get you to haul my barrel to town for me."

"What barrel?"

"It ran into the cornfield when it heard you coming. But it'll come out again if I whistle."

Here was my chance to have some fun. Grabbing several big ears of corn, and scrooching in my barrel, I sort of poked the new ears on top of me. This made it look as though the barrel was full of green corn. Then, taking short steps, with my feet out of sight, and one eye fastened to a slit in the staves, I went out where the audience was.

Poppy almost fell over at sight of the "walking barrel." As for smarty, his eyes stuck out like warts on a squash. But not being completely and hopelessly dumb, he caught on as I made a circle of the truck. And *mad!* Say, when I did the jack-in-the-box stuff on him, with the same kind of a hee-haw that he had handed to us at the bank, I thought he'd peg the whole truck at me.

"He's heading for Mrs. O'Mally's house to get a load of cucumbers," I told Poppy, when the truck had gone on down the dusty country road.

"The dickens! Do you suppose he'll take all she's got and make us wait?"

"We paid her for four bushels with the promise that they'd be ready for us any time after four o'clock. And from what I know of her I don't think she'll go back on her word."

"Just the same," says Poppy, "I'd like to make sure. For we need those cucumbers. So, as you were going back there anyway to borrow a night-gown, let's follow him. We needn't show ourselves."

Winding up our legs, we soon were back within sight of the stone house. And sure enough, as I had told Poppy, the canning factory truck was pulled up beside the cucumber patch. Ducking into a cornfield that skirted the big patch, we stopped at the sound of voices.

"No," says Mrs. O'Mally, "them four baskets are sold. I can't let ye have 'em."

"But I want all you've got," insisted the important acting truck driver.

"I'm sorry. But the other two b'ys was ahead of ye."

"Who do you mean?—that Ott kid and young Todd?"

"Yes. They bought them four baskets an' paid me for 'em."

Smarty gave a mean laugh.

"Some more of their 'Pickle Parlor' stuff, I suppose. A bunch of junk. *Them* run a business and

get away with it? Say, they couldn't draw a picture of a straight line and do a good job of it. Let me tell you something, old lady: you're crazy to sell pickles to kids like them when you've got a big responsible company like ours to deal with. For when we buy we buy big."

"Yes," the pickle woman gave the bragger a dig, "an' at half the price that other people pay me."

"A dollar a bushel is a good price."

"You wouldn't think so if ye had to pick 'em. Look at me ould back. 'Tis bent like the twisted willows that ye see on the river bank."

Smarty made himself as important acting as he could.

"As it happens you're luckier then you realize to get even a dollar a bushel from us. For at first the talk was in the office of paying you only ninety cents a bushel this year."

"Oh, indeed!" Mrs. O'Mally was getting mad now, as her words and actions showed. " 'Twas all decided in your office, was it? I had nothing to say in the matter at all."

"Buying cucumbers is purely a matter of business with us. To make money we've got to buy right. Hence we set our own price."

"An' is it on the same plan that ye buy the bottles?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do ye say to the bottle man: 'I'll pay so much.' Or does *he* set the price on his own goods?"

"That's different."

"Yes," came bitterly, "the difference is that you're dealin' with a firm as smart as yourselves an' not with a helpless ould woman."

Smarty didn't like that.

"Say! . . ." he swelled up. "We aren't trying to cheat you. They're your cucumbers, and you don't have to sell them to us if you don't want to."

"You know I have no other place to sell 'em."

"That's your lookout. If you didn't want to have them to sell you shouldn't have raised them."

"The young smart aleck," gritted Poppy, when the truck, with its small load, had disappeared in the direction of town. "He ought to have his mouth slapped for talking that way to an old lady."

"I never knew before," says I, sort of thoughtful-like, "that all Mrs. O'Mally got from the canning company for her cucumbers was a dollar a bushel. Why, after paying for the picking it's a wonder to me that she makes any money at all."

Poppy took in the length and breadth of the big cucumber patch.

"I wonder how many bushels of cucumbers she'll have to sell this year."

"Six-seven hundred probably."

"Gee!" and his eyes were like stars. "Wouldn't it be slick, Jerry, if we could buy the whole shooting match . . . at two dollars a bushel?"

I gave a squeak.

"*Us* buy seven hundred bushels of cucumbers? You're crazy."

"Of course," he nodded thoughtfully, "we couldn't sell that many pickles in Tutter. I realize that. But why couldn't we do business in other towns?"

"If you don't shut up," I told him weakly, "I'll die of heart failure. *Us* handle seven hundred bushels of cucumbers? Good night nurse! Old Butch couldn't can seven hundred bushels of cucumbers in seven years."

Having borrowed a pair of big-waisted trousers from the scarecrow in Mrs. O'Mally's strawberry patch, I put on a clever little "Charlie Chaplin" program going home. I thought I was rather funny myself. But from Poppy I got about as much attention as a goldfish in a crowded menagerie. I suppose, though, had I been a cute little cucumber it would have gotten a loving smack on the forehead.

Cucumbers! That's where his mind was, all right. He was completely and hopelessly buried in cucumbers.

That night after supper my chum and I borrowed

Dad's auto and drove into the country, getting our first load of cucumbers. As it had been decided to establish our pickling headquarters at Poppy's house, the cucumbers were taken there. And the next morning the pickling began.

But before we let old Butch touch the cucumbers we led him over to the kitchen sink and introduced him to the soap dish and a basin of water. Poppy washed first, to show how it was done; then me; after which, of course, the pickle expert had to follow suit. But he didn't like it for two cents.

"I swan!" he grumbled. "Anyone would think from all the pernickety washin' an' wipin' that's goin' on that we were gittin' ready to give a swell party. Don't you know that if a feller's hands is dirty he'll git 'em washed clean when he messes 'round in the pickles? So what's the use of goin' to all this extra trouble?"

"But you aren't so liable to get chapped hands," says Poppy, like the tactful little piece of cheese that he is, "if you wash in warm water."

The pickle maker gave a snort.

"Chapped hands in the summer time! I swan! You'll be tellin' me next to wear woolen socks to keep from gittin' the chilblains."

"Here," says Poppy, frisking out a stiff white butcher's apron that his pa had used on an earlier meat-market job. "Try it on and see how it fits."

Old Butch let out his neck at the curiosity.

"You mean," says he, "that you want me to *wear* it?"

"Sure thing."

"But what's it fur?"

"To keep you from getting your pants dirty. And here's a nice little white cap to go with it."

That was more than Butch could stand.

"I come here to make pickles," says he stiffly, "an' not to be made a monkey of in a dunce cap."

"I thought you'd like the cap," says Poppy. "For all professional pickle makers wear white caps. So let's put it on, anyway, and see how it fits."

"I feel like a fool," grunted Butch, squinting with shame at the reflection of himself in the kitchen mirror.

"Now," says Poppy, "we're all ready to go to work."

Old Butch started across the run and stopped.

"By the way, you hain't up an' spent all your money, be you?"

"I should say not."

"Um . . . An' it was to be three-fifty a day, you said."

"Three dollars and fifty cents a day," nodded Poppy. "And you get your pay every night, if you wish."

"In cash?"

"Cash or check. Whichever way you say."

"Well, I think I'll take the cash. Fur I kain't make it seem right in my mind that they's anything sartin 'bout my pay in workin' fur two boys."

The first step in pickle making, we learned, was to wash and sort the cucumbers. So we took out those that we thought were too big or too small. I helped to scrub the cucumbers with a hand brush. Then we rinsed them in several changes of water. Having bought two metal tubs, we scrubbed these as clean as a whistle and filled them with salt water, after which we put the cucumbers to soak in the "brine," as the pickle maker called it.

This was on Saturday. Nothing happened on Sunday. And on Monday the pickle maker took the cucumbers out of the brine and soaked them in different changes of fresh water. I never dreamed that you had to give a cucumber so many different kinds of baths before it was a pickle—my idea was that you put the cucumbers on the stove to cook and when they had cooked an hour or two they were pickles. But Butch seemed to know his business. So, much as we hated to let the work drag along, we didn't try any hurry-up stuff with him.

On Tuesday he had us buy a whole list of stuff —alum, sugar, cider vinegar, celery seed, allspice

and stick cinnamon. And don't imagine, either, that we bought a dime's worth of each, or anything like that. I guess not! The junk cost us exactly eleven dollars and forty-five cents.

To put the Tutter people wise to how good our pickles were, Poppy had worked out a sample scheme, and having for this purpose bought three hundred drug-store bottles, just big enough to hold four pickles each with the cucumbers packed on end, he and I were deep in the job of washing and scalding these bottles when who should come into the house on the tear but old Mr. Ott.

"Poppy," he says, ripping off his coat and giving it a throw, "why didn't you remind me that this is the day?"

"What day?" says Poppy in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"Why, this is the Thursday my nepher in Rockford gits married. An' to git there in time fur the weddin' we've got to catch the eleven o'clock train. So hurry, now, as it's twenty minutes to eleven already."

"Oh, gee, Pa!" Poppy objected to being dragged away from his beloved pickles. "Do I have to go?"

"You most certainly do. Fur they asked me special to bring you along."

"But I ought to stay and help Jerry. For see the work there is to do."

"Go git your Sunday clothes on like I tell you an' quit arguin' with me. Fur Henny is the only nepher I've got. So it's our family duty to be there when he gits hitched up."

Twenty minutes later old Butch and I had the house to ourselves. But now I was ordered to clear out of the kitchen by the secretive pickler, who had no intention of letting me see how he mixed up the liquid dope that gave the pickles their swell taste. That, he said, was the secret part of the work.

The following morning I got a telegram from Poppy. His father, he wired, having eaten too much wedding cake was sick in bed. "Go ahead and distribute the samples," the telegram instructed. "I'll surely be home to-morrow or Sunday."

Some of the pickles were in pint and quart jars. But the most of them were in a barrel that we had gotten at a grocery store. They sure were swell-looking pickles, all right. But—oof!—I couldn't bring myself to eat any of them. Even to handle them in packing the sample bottles almost gagged me.

One thousand and two hundred pickles having been put away quartet style in the three hundred bottles, I did the corking and label sticking, after which I borrowed a neighbor's pushcart and set out, leaving a sample bottle and a handbill at every

house in our end of town. I think you'll agree with me that Poppy's printed handbill was pretty slick. Here it is:

AUNT JEMIMA'S PICKLES

Every housewife knows how good Aunt Jemima's pancakes are. And now we have cucumber pickles of the same wonderful quality—Aunt Jemima's pickles—home-made, with a taste you'll never forget.

Here at last are the perfect pickles you long have dreamed of, the kind of pickles that you never could quite make in your own kitchen. And the secret, of course, is in the secret recipe!

We know that when you have sampled these marvelous pickles you will want more. And the only place where you can buy them—in the bulk at 20¢ a dozen, and in sealed-tight glass jars at 35¢ a pint and 65¢ a quart—is at

POPPY'S PICKLE PARLOR

"The Green and Yellow Store"

224 South Main Street

CHAPTER IX

THE WORLD TIPS OVER

Did you ever notice how crazy some people are to get something for nothing? A free show always gets a big hand no matter how punk it is. And however much some women may hate cornflakes, if a tiny package of breakfast food is tossed on their front porch it's dearer to them than gold. Zip! Out they come to grab the sample almost before it stops rolling. I found this out one time when Red Meyers and I tagged a sample peddler around with the clever little scheme in mind of snitching his stuff behind his back. But we didn't get very much. For the women for the most part were too quick for us.

To make sure of my own samples, I waited, after knocking, until the woman of the house came to the door Then, giving her the pickles, together with a handbill, I politely recited my little speech, as I had memorized it ahead of time. Nor was there any frisky broom-swatting stuff this trip. As a matter of fact, I think Mrs. Bagley was very sorry for having swatted me! For she saw now that I was

a young business man. And there is a big difference, you know, between swatting an ordinary kid over the head and a young business man.

I missed Poppy's help. For our store had to be moved. And it had been his intention to sort of boss the moving job while I dished out the samples. As it was, I had both jobs to do.

Running home at six o'clock, as hungry as a bear, I found a note from Mother telling me that she and Dad had gone over to the Methodist church to a chicken-pie supper. Chicken pie! Um-yum! What I wouldn't do to that chicken pie, I told myself, pocketing the four bits that they had left for me. But eager as I was to wrap myself around a nice hunk of white meat smothered in gravy, I had the good manners to stop and wash up. I put on a clean shirt, too. For it wasn't to be forgotten that I was now in business for myself.

It sure was a swell supper. But an old lady who had to listen through a tin pan almost spoiled the feed for me by passing me pickles. And, worse, they were greasy stuffed olives. Oof! Instead of taking one I asked her to please park the dish under the table.

I was up bright and early the following morning, having arranged with old Butch to do the store moving before the other people were out of bed. Hearing us in his yard, Mr. Weckler got up to help.

But there wasn't much that he and I could do except to look on. For the moving job, as Butch went at it with his wheels and other truck, was no trick at all. At six-thirty our store was properly set down, close to the sidewalk, in the vacant lot across the street from the cannery.

People who worked in the factory stopped on their way past to rubber at us. And I heard a lot of laughing talk back and forth about the new "Pickle Parlor." Then who should roll up to the curb in a truck but little cutie, himself.

"You've got your nerve," he lit into me, "moving this junk into our parking lot."

"*Your* lot?" says I, going ahead with my work of arranging pickle jars on the shelves. "How do you get that way? This is Mr. Weckler's lot."

"Well, even so, we've got a better right to it than you."

Stepping back, I gave a critical eye to my finished work.

"Looks swell, doesn't it?" says I, moving one jar a hair's breadth.

"Say! . . . Did you hear what I said?"

"YES!" I boomed at him in the same thundering voice. "I HEARD WHAT YOU SAID. But what you say doesn't amount to much. So, unless you want to buy some pickles, go outside in the sun and make a shadow."

Here another auto came as far as the curb and stopped.

"What's the meaning of this?" says Mr. Norman Pennykorn, coming into the store with a dark face. "Who gave you permission to move this nonsensical building onto our lot?"

I wasn't going to let him bluff me.

"This is Mr. Weckler's lot. And he told us that we could use it."

"We need the lot for our cars."

I asked him then why he didn't park his cars on their own property across the street, which made him mad.

"In our business," he swelled up, figuring, of course, that this would scare me to death, "we aren't in the habit of explaining to *boys* why we do this or don't do that. The point is, we object to having such a ridiculous outfit as this moved in front of our office. And, further, we need the lot for our own use. So, if you are wise you'll have this building taken back where it came from."

I couldn't help but wish that old Poppy were there. For he can wind up his gab to match anybody's.

"Suppose we don't move out," says I. "What will happen to us?"

"We'll buy the lot and force you out."

Well, there wasn't anything that I could say to

that. Certainly, if they wanted to buy the lot, and Mr. Weckler was willing to sell it to them, we couldn't stop the deal. But what made me hot was the thought that they had waited until now to do their buying. It looked like spitework to me. Still, it was hard for me to believe that a big business man like Mr. Norman Pennykorn would act that way with a couple of boys.

This, as you will remember, was on Saturday morning. And as Saturday is always a busy day in the stores I figured that we ought to sell a lot of pickles. But at eleven-thirty I hadn't taken in a penny. Then, who should breeze in but old Poppy, himself.

"Hot dog!" says he, looking around. "This sure is the berries. How's business?"

"Rotten," says I.

"When did you open up?"

"This morning."

"Peddle the samples?"

"Sure thing."

"And you haven't had any business in result?"

I shook my head.

"The only two people who were in the store all morning were young Pennykorn and his father. And they came to order us out."

The returned one pricked up his ears.

"Order us out?" says he. "What do you mean?"

Getting the story, he hurried down the street to learn from the lot's owner if the property had been sold. But he soon came back into sight. And was he ever stepping high!

"We're all right, Jerry. Mr. Weckler says they can't buy the lot now if they offer him ten times what he asked them for it in the first place. It seems he was sore at them for parking their cars here. And a month or so ago he told them that if the lot was so necessary to them in their business they'd better buy it. But you know how tight they are. What was the use of spending a thousand dollars for the lot, was their idea, when they could get the use of it for nothing? So they never bought it. And now Mr. Weckler is tickled to think that we crowded them out. He's on our side strong. They just offered him twelve hundred for the lot. But he told them that, having rented it to us, it wasn't for sale."

I was out in front when smarty got into his truck to go home to dinner. And you should have seen him glare at me. But I stepped around as big as cuffy. We should worry about *him*.

As Mr. Ott had decided to stay in Rockford for a few days, which left Poppy alone, I had him go home with me to dinner. Mother was all excited. Half of the town was sick, she said. Since his first

call at midnight, Doc Leland hadn't had time to draw an extra breath.

"What is it?" says Poppy. "Some kind of an epidemic?"

"Ptomaine poisoning, as I understand it."

Poppy and I put in the afternoon at the store. And still no customers. We couldn't understand it. Was the scheme all wrong? It would seem so. Still, we hung on, how could it be wrong?

"Maybe," I suggested, "we ought to sort of go out and look for customers instead of waiting for them to come to us."

"Just what do you mean by that?" says he.

"We might be able to sell a pile of pickles if we went from house to house."

That was well worth trying, he agreed. So, leaving him to run the store, I started out with a loaded market basket on my arm.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Brown," says I at the first house. "You probably remember me," I beamed.

"Yes," she snapped. "I remember you *well.*"

"Yesterday afternoon," says I, wondering what had upset her, "I gave you a sample of our pickles—"

"Pickles?" she cut in. "Do you mean to call those filthy things *pickles?"*

I stared. Then a horrified thought sort of

swooped down on me. I hadn't tasted the pickles! Could it be that something was wrong with them?

I got out of the yard as quickly as I could. And hurrying to the nearest alley, out of sight, I unscrewed the top of a pint jar. Stiffening myself, to overcome my gaggy feeling, I took a bite. And then—

Well, say! I spit that pickle clean over the top of Denny Kirk's barn. For if I must tell you the truth it was the rottenest pickle I ever had tasted in all my life. The wonder to me was that I didn't heave up my whole insides.

Cutting down the street to the store, I found my chum with his face buried in a Chicago newspaper.

"Jerry," says he, looking up at me with eyes as big as saucers, "did you eat any of the new pickles?"

"Thank heaven *no!*" I yipped, running to the door to spit.

"It would be awful," he wiped his sweaty face, "if any of the people were to die."

"Die?" says I, going cold. And then the truth of the matter dawned on me, too. *It was our pickles that had done the poisoning!*

My knees giving out, I sat down. And it was then that my chum showed me the article in the evening newspaper. It wasn't much—just three or four

lines in small type. But it sure told the whole story.

Over a hundred patients were being treated by Tutter physicians for ptomaine poisoning, the result of eating contaminated pickles, the newspaper said. The state board of health was expected to act on the case immediately.

CHAPTER X

THE GOLD CUCUMBER

Poppy and I were in a bad fix. There were no "if's" or "and's" about that. Not only was our pickle business shot sky high, but we were liable to end up in jail. In fact, it was something of a wonder to us that we weren't already in jail.

Plainly enough something had gone wrong with the pickle making. While we were running around with a microscope looking for specks of dirt, old Butch had gotten hold of the fly poison or furniture polish by mistake. From the way the pickles tasted I could imagine, too, that he had dumped in an old rubber boot. Anyway, something had gotten into the pickles that didn't belong there. And it was this something, whatever it was, that had poisoned them.

But the mere fact that the pickle maker, himself, had pulled the boner didn't let us out. Not at all. For he was just a hired part of our business. As its owners, we would be held responsible.

Oh, how dumb we had been to let him go ahead—sloppy old coot that he was—without checking up

on every little thing that he had done! We realized that now. But a fellow it seems always realizes those things when it's too late, like the time I sent the homely valentine to the teacher. Ouch!

Old Butch, we learned, on sending a message into Zulutown, had gone up the canal on a towing job. So we had no chance of finding out from him how the poison had gotten into the pickles, or what it was. To that point, though, the chances were ten to one he couldn't have told us, anyway. For it wasn't to be believed for a single moment that he had known that there was poison in the pickles. He was sloppy and dirty. But he wasn't a fool.

The same kid who brought us word of the closed Zulutown house carried a note to Mother in which I explained that Poppy and I wouldn't be home for supper. Eat? Say, we hadn't any more appetite than a seasick totem pole.

It came dark. And finally we locked up the store and went down the street. Nor did we try to hide when we saw the marshal coming. For we realized that our medicine was waiting for us. So we might just as well take it first as last.

"Howdy," says Bill Hadley, as friendly as you please. "Sellin' lots of pickles?"

"No," says Poppy, with a face as long as the day before Christmas, "we haven't sold any."

"Which hain't to be wondered at," says Bill. "Fur them four samples that you left with my wife was the rottenest pickles that ever sneaked into a glass bottle. What'd you flavor 'em with?—fumigated sauerkraut?"

"Jerry thinks it was an old rubber boot," Poppy grinned weakly.

"Um . . . No rubber boot ever taste that bad."

"You're lucky," says I, wishing he'd light into us and thus end the suspense, "that you didn't eat them. For if you had you'd be in bed to-night along with the rest of the people."

That seemed to surprise him.

"What do you mean?" says he, looking at me curiously.

"Haven't you heard," says I, surprised in turn, "about the people being poisoned?"

"Sure thing."

"Well," says I, "the pickles did it. So if you had eaten them *you* would have been poisoned, too."

He scratched his head.

"What pickles are you talkin' about?" says he.

"Why, our pickles, of course."

"But it wasn't your pickles that poisoned the people. It was them stuffed olives that they had at the church supper last night. I hear, too, that they

hain't expectin' old Miz Higgins to pull through. Too bad! Too bad! That'll give church suppers a black eye fur the next ten years."

Poppy and I blew in a dollar and seventy cents that night celebrating. Oh, boy, did we ever have a grand and glorious feeling! First we stocked up with candy and popcorn. Then we went to the movie show. After the show we had three dishes of ice cream apiece and two malted milks. That is, I had two. Poppy, though, kind of petered out on his second one.

But when we got home we sort of parked our hilarity under the bed. For it wasn't to be forgotten, the leader said, serious again, that our pickle business was none the less of a fizzle. And to find out just how heavy our loss was he got out his expense book. Here is a list of the money that we had spent:

Lumber	$ 3.00	Store stuff	$ 2.00
Paint	2.00	Butch's wages	21.00
Newspaper ad	.50	Moving store	10.00
Cucumbers	8.00	Celebration	1.70
Pickle stuff	11.45	Total paid out	$68.00
Tubs (2)	1.70		
Barrel	.40	Money in bank	$100.00
Bottles	3.00	Money paid out	68.00
Bottle labels	.75		
Handbills	2.50	Money left	$ 32.00

"It might have been worse," says I, trying not to feel downhearted over the loss of our money. "We've got thirty-two dollars left and the two tubs."

"But you don't know the worst," says Poppy, sitting on the edge of the bed with his chin in his hands.

"What do you mean?" says I, suddenly struck by the fact that he was acting unusually downcast.

"Prepare yourself for some bad news, kid."

"Have we lost the thirty-two dollars, too?" I squeaked.

"Worse than that."

He wasn't joking. I saw that plainly enough. In fact, he seemed to be downright worried. I never had seen him that way before. So I got worried, too. But to all of my eager questions he shook his head. He'd tell me the tale of woe in the morning, he said.

During the night the hall light outside of our bedroom was switched on, and sitting up in bed, blinking, I saw Doc Leland waddle past the door, jiggling something in a glass. He had been called to the house, I learned, to see Mother, who, having gotten a pain in her stomach in the middle of the night, had hysterically jumped to the conclusion that she, too, had been poisoned. But all she had was a touch of indigestion.

Hearing me talking with Dad in the hall, Doc

waddled out of the sick room to inquire how my stomach pains were. I was all right, I said.

Ding-a-ling-a-ling-a-ling went the 'phone in the lower hall.

"It's for you, Doc," Dad presently called up the stairs.

"Yes," Doc wheezed into the machine when he got to it. "This is Leland. What's that? Who? Oh! . . . Old Mr. Weckler. Yes, I'll be right over. Now, don't let yourself get flustered, Miz Clayton. Jest keep cool an' do the best you can for him till I get there. You won't have to wait many seconds."

"Is Mr. Weckler sick, too?" Dad inquired.

"Miz Clayton says some one tried to murder him."

"What?" cried Dad.

"It's her story that she found him lyin' in the library in a pool of blood. Robbery, I s'pose. Well, let's hope I get there in time to save him." There was some hurried talk about Mother's medicine. She would be all right by morning, Doc said. Then the front door slammed.

I got my chum out of bed in a jiffy.

"Did you hear that?" says I excitedly.

"What?" says he, looking at me sleepily.

"A robber broke into old Mr. Weckler's house to-night and tried to murder him."

Poppy bounced three feet.

"Quick!" says I. "Jump into your clothes."

Lucky for us we were of a size. For in the scramble to get dressed I got his pants and he got my shoes. Nor were we completely buttoned up until we were halfway down the block.

Except for the sounds that we stirred up ourselves as we skinned along on the toes of our rubber-soled shoes, the empty streets were as silent as their own deep shadows. And while it was midsummer, with the days soaked full of heat, there was now a damp feeling in the air that sort of cranked up our shivering apparatus. Maybe, though, it wasn't so much the night air that gave us the shivers as it was the excitement.

Murder! That's the worst kind of a crime that can be committed. And if it were true, as Mrs. Clayton had told Doc over the 'phone, that an attempt had been made to kill old Mr. Weckler in his own home, then there was in Tutter a criminal of the worst sort. Naturally, Bill Hadley would be on the job. For, as town marshal, this was work in his line. There would be a quick search for clews; then, no doubt, an exciting arrest. As we had helped Bill before, and to very good results, too, as you should well know if you have read my books about the "Whispering Mummy" and the "Purring Egg," we were quite sure that he would let us help

him on this job. As a matter of fact, we felt that it was our duty to help him. For wasn't Mr. Weckler our "silent" partner? Furthermore, if the same robber, in earlier work, had been in Poppy's house, as we both thought, certainly Bill ought to know about it.

Our pickle store got scarcely a glance from us as we went by on the run. And a moment or two later we tumbled into the yard in front of the old-fashioned house of which we had seen so much lately, but over which now a cloud of mystery hung. There were bright lights in the downstairs windows. And the front door was open.

Under the circumstances we didn't stop to knock. Nor did Doc or Mrs. Clayton seem at all surprised when we tumbled in on them. As a matter of fact, I think they were glad to see us. For, with the housekeeper shivering and shaking, we supplied the help Doc needed to get the unconscious man onto the library couch. Blood! His head was bloody and there was blood all over the floor. I even got my hands in it. Ough! It sort of sickened me.

"Some hot water," says Doc crisply, "an' make it snappy."

Poppy and I got the water for him. For we could move faster than the housekeeper. To tell the truth, she wasn't any help to him at all. And

for fear that he might have her on his hands, along with the injured house owner, he ordered her to back up into a chair and stay there.

Later the still unconscious man was carried upstairs and put into his bed, after which Doc telephoned for a trained nurse. Mr. Weckler was in mighty bad shape, we learned. Even if he lived it probably would be necessary to operate on his skull to give him back the use of his mind.

"When he comes to," Doc told the nurse, who got there just as the clock struck three, "he'll prob'ly be as crazy as a loon. So be right here beside the bed. For if given a minute he may do hisself serious harm."

"I'll be here," says the nurse grimly.

In ordering the housekeeper back to bed, Doc mixed up some kind of dope to settle her nerves. And then, when everything was quiet in the house, he waddled into the library and thumbed through the 'phone book for a number.

"It's time now," says he, "to call in the law."

An open window showed how the unknown robber had gotten into and out of the house. Going outside we found heel prints under the window. Here, too, our flashlight picked up the carcass of Mr. Weckler's yellow cat. Stone dead, Poppy said. Running ahead, he followed the escaping robber's tracks in the soft grassy earth. Coming to a flower

bed, around which I now vaguely remembered that a heavy wire had been strung, I saw him drop to his knees. For the robber, it seems, striking the knee-high wire in his flight from the house, had gone kerplunk! on his snout into the flower bed. The imprint of his right hand showed plainly, but, strange to say, there was no left-hand imprint.

The silence of the sleeping street was broken by the rattle of a flivver. Then a shaft of light cut across the yard in a sweeping circle. Bill Hadley having arrived, I started forward to meet him with the story of our discoveries. But a cry from Poppy stopped me.

"Jerry! Look! Here's money that flew out of the robber's pocket. Fifty cents and three quarters. Here's a knife, too. And here's something else." There was a short silence. "Well, I'll be cow-kicked! What do you know if it isn't a cucumber! A *gold cucumber!*"

I was back in two jumps. A gold cucumber! What in time did he mean by that? I soon found out. For he had the object in his hand. A sort of pocket piece, about an inch long and as heavy as lead, it had been cast in the perfect pattern of a cucumber.

We knew now that the robber was one-armed; that for some strange reason he hated yellow cats; and that he had a particular interest in cucumbers.

CHAPTER XI

THE CAT KILLER

During the next hour Bill Hadley did a lot of noisy stomping around. For that's his way of working. He has the idea, I guess, that it makes him seem important.

But so far as I could see no new clews were added to the ones that we already had picked up, except that he found out the truth about the dead cat. And right here comes a strange part of my story. Can you imagine a one-armed man strangling a cat? If a job like that were wished onto me I think I'd need *six* hands. For I know something about cats! How then had this geezer managed it one-handed? And awful as it was to think about, an act so inhuman as that, why had he done it?

No doubt it was all imagination on my part, but during the time that we were in the yard, hedged in as we were by a black thicket of crouching bushes and quivering overhead leaves, I had the shaky feeling that a pair of burning eyes were secretly watching us. But we could pick up nothing with our flashlights. I was glad, though, to go

inside. Walls gave me a safer feeling. A one-armed cat killer! Br-r-r-r! None of that grab-it-by-the-neck-and-drag-it-around stuff for me.

It was Mr. Weckler's library safe, Bill said, that had gotten the burglar's eyes. But so far as we could see the safe hadn't been opened, which led us to the belief that the defeated housebreaker had been scared away right after the attack.

"The dum cat is what gits me," says Bill, all tangled up in that angle of the mystery. "I kin understand the attack on old Weckler—the chances are he heard noises below an' come down here to investigate, to the unfortunate result that we already know—but I kain't fur the life of me figure out why the geezer killed the cat. Did he do it first off on coming into the house, to keep it from yowling? Or did he do it after beanin' the old gent? An' why in time did he *strangle* it? If he wanted to kill it, why didn't he jest whack it in the head?"

"This isn't the first queer thing that the robber has done," says Poppy. "For the other night he broke into our cellar and strewed pickles all over the floor."

"It could 'a' bin the same geezer," waggled Bill, on getting the whole story. Then he walked around shaking his head, as though he were more puzzled than ever.

At four-thirty old Mr. Weckler was no closer to

consciousness than when we had carried him upstairs, so there was no hope of getting any early help from him on the mystery. The nurse told us that steps were being taken by the doctors for an early operation. The poor old man! I kind of choked up when I looked at him, so still and white. I thought of the time my dog was run over by the garbage wagon. And I wished with all my heart that this awful accident hadn't happened. For he had been good to us. In fact, few men would have done the things for us that he had done. For most men are too busy with their own work to give much thought or help to a boy's schemes.

We solemnly buried the dead cat beside the onion bed in the weedy garden. It was daylight now. And as there was nothing more for us to do here, as I could see, I passed the suggestion to Poppy that we beat it for home and have a beauty nap. But he shook his head, telling me that he wanted to stay here and have an early talk with Mrs. Clayton, who was sleeping off the effect of Doc's medicine. Getting his promise to meet me at Sunday School, I went off with Bill in the flivver. Dad got up when he heard me come in. And learning that Mother was sleeping, I quietly slipped into my own bed. Nor was I more than five or six minutes getting my snoozer cranked up.

I was up again at nine-thirty. And after a late

breakfast of my own making I dolled up in my best duds and sashayed down the street to the Methodist church. People in the street were talking with considerable excitement about the attempted robbery. But I didn't say anything. For a good detective doesn't run around blabbing his stuff.

Presently I met Mr. Stair.

"Well," says he, thinking that he was pulling something clever, "how's Aunt Jemima this morning?"

I felt like telling him, "None of your beeswax." But I held in. For a boy doesn't gain anything by being sassy to older people.

But when Bid Stricker percolated into the summer scenery and tossed some more of the "Aunt Jemima" stuff at me, I took after him lickety-cut. I couldn't run him down, though, for I had on my tight leather shoes. So I gave him a few rocks to remember me by. One of these flying rocks went kersmack! into the tin stomach of Doc Leland's old Lizzie as it gurgled around a corner. Gee! Doc almost swallowed his false teeth. Then, in the thought that he had a blow-out he socked on the brakes with such force that his hat and nose glasses shot right over the top of his head into the back seat.

"Just my confounded luck," he wheezed, throwing the jack and other tire tools out of the car. Carry-

ing the jack from wheel to wheel, and finding all four tires full of air, he stood and stared.

"I've had punctures," he rumbled, "that I never heard. But this is the first time I ever heard one that I haven't got."

Grinning, I asked him how Mr. Weckler was.

"Him?" he slam-banged the jack and other stuff into the back of the car on top of his straw hat. "Oh, he's jest about the same. Opened his eyes once an' started talkin'. But it was stuff we couldn't make any sense of fur the most part."

"And he hasn't told you yet who hit him?"

"Nope."

At the church Poppy led me quickly into the basement, as he wanted to talk with me in secret behind the furnace.

"Jerry," came excitedly, "I've found out something. Did you know that this river pirate of yours used to raise cucumbers?"

"Who? Old Peg-leg Weir?"

He nodded.

"Mrs. Clayton told me about it. And later on I got the full particulars from old Mr. Hartenbower."

Mr. Silas Hartenbower, I might say, is a centenarian, or whatever you call it. Last June the whole county turned out to celebrate his one-hundred-and-second birthday. That was the afternoon Red Meyers and I made the bet to see who

could eat the most pink ice cream. The big pig! He won.

"I didn't take much stock in that pirate story when you first dished it out to me," says Poppy. "For it sounded fishy. But when Mrs. Clayton told me about the pirate's *cucumbers*—and when I heard about the *iron mold* from Mr. Hartenbower —oh, baby!"

Here a big yellow cat meandered around the furnace and took a curious squint at us. It strangely reminded me of Mr. Weckler's cat. But when I reached down to pet it, it ran and jumped into an open window, the sill of which was on a level with the outside yard.

"It's Mr. Hartenbower's story," says Poppy, "that old Peg-leg Weir covered up his unlawful river work for years by making a pretense of raising cucumbers for a living. Every summer he had a big bed of cucumbers back of his house—probably in the very same place where Mrs. O'Mally has her big patch. As he always had plenty of money, the neighbors got the idea that his cucumber seed brought a fabulous price. Hence the cucumbers were something extra-special, they thought. But the patch was left strictly alone when one farmer, who tried to snitch a peck or two of the cucumbers to get some of the seed for his own use, went home with a charge of bird shot in his

legs. That was Mr. Hartenbower, himself, then only twenty-two years old. The next winter the truth came out about the pirate. A posse of angry farmers surrounded his house, determined to capture him, and it was then, I was told, that he was shot down. Some battle, I guess. Mr. Hartenbower searched the house for cucumber seed. Couldn't find a one. He did find a queer iron mold, though. Out of curiosity he later filled it with melted lead. And when he took the lead piece out of the mold, what do you suppose it was?"

"Bullets?" says I, remembering stories I had heard about early pioneer days.

"No," he shook his head, "it wasn't bullets. It was a little cucumber, about an inch long."

I stared at him. And I could feel my eyes growing as big as his.

"As you can imagine," he ran on, "I almost fell off my chair when old Mr. Hartenbower told me about the lead cucumber. For the truth fairly jumped at me. Our gold cucumber was a part of the pirate's hidden treasure! Cucumbers having been his hobby, he had made a mold in which to cast his gold in the shape of little cucumbers, though what his object was I can't imagine. But he did it—I'm dead sure of that. Gold cucumbers! Hundreds of them probably. If only we can find them. Eh, Jerry, old pal?"

Upstairs, in the opening of Sunday School, they were singing "Love Lifted Me." So, with the pipe organ booming away like a bull with a burr under its tail, and a hundred kids yipping out the "Love-Lifted-Me" stuff at the top of their voices, I felt safe in doing some excited yipping myself. Treasure hunters ! That's what we were now. And to think only a few hours ago we had let ourselves get excited over a dinky little pickle business! Why, if we could find the pirate's gold cucumbers we'd have a thousand times more jack in our pockets than a pickle store would earn for us in a thousand years. Automobiles! Airplanes! Motor boats! Candy and ice cream by the ton! We could buy *anything*, no matter what it cost. For gold cucumbers would be worth as much, pound for pound, as gold money. We knew that, all right.

The cat that I have mentioned, after washing itself, had gone to sleep on the sunny window sill. And now, as a long iron thing, like a pair of tongs, came stealthily through the window, inch by inch, and closed, with a snap like a fighting dog's teeth on the furry neck of the luckless animal, I let out a screech that must have lifted the whole Sunday School to its feet.

Then, to my further horror, the struggling, gurgling, choking cat was whisked through the window and out of our sight.

CHAPTER XII

MRS. O'MALLY'S "GHOST"

To this day Poppy tells the crazy story that I screeched so loud that I rocked the furniture. And the wonder is, he further kids me, that the pipe organ didn't streak it for the front door. Which is all bunk, of course. Still, it is to be admitted that I *did* break up the Sunday School. Following a babble of excited voices, we heard quick footsteps coming toward the basement door. Then the door opened. But by this time the leader had his head in the window.

"Quick!" says he, going over the sill on his stomach. To hurry me along he got down on his knees and gave me his hands. I have a hunch that whoever led the way down the stairs caught a glimpse of my flying legs as I went out through the window. But that was nothing to worry about.

Getting to my feet, the first thing I did, of course, like Poppy, was to look around for the cat killer. But, to my surprise, there was no one in sight. Determined not to let the fellow get away from us, we scooted, tandem-style, around the

church. Still no success. Nor could we see anybody in the street except two gray-haired ladies in an old-fashioned buggy who were arguing in the deaf-and-dumb language over which hitching post they should use: the one in front of the church or the one at the parsonage. Next we ran to the alley, where we saw plenty of ash cans, but nothing on two legs except a junky-acting rooster.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" panted Poppy. "Where in Sam Hill did he go to, anyway?—into the earth?"

This new stuff tangled us up worse than ever. If the man had been listening to us, as seemed probable, considering how very careful he had been to keep back out of sight, why had he jerked the cat through the window? Was it to scare us?

But how strange, to go deeper, that he had been so close to us when we least suspected it! Still, on that point, all of his actions had been strange. In many ways he was as mysterious as a shadow, itself.

A cat-strangling machine! Ugh! The poor cat had been given no chance at all. But if the mystery of *how* he did his cat strangling had thus been cleared up to us, we had yet to learn *why* he did it.

Having upset the Sunday School, we decided that it was a good place to keep away from. So that was one Sunday that the church didn't get our two dimes. Our plan now was to see what information we could pick up at Mrs. O'Mally's house. And as

we had a long dusty walk ahead of us on the bottom road, we hurried home and changed our clothes.

"I haven't told you," says Poppy, when we were headed for the river, "about my talk with Mrs. Clayton. She was awakened, she said, by a cat scream—as she describes it, a most hideous scream. Thinking that the house cat was in trouble, she started downstairs, but as Mr. Weckler was ahead of her on the stairs she went back to bed. Just as she was dozing off she heard a cry; then something fell. She almost fainted, I guess, when she saw what had happened in the library. And as soon as she could, of course, she got Doc on the telephone."

"Did you tell her that Peter is dead?"

"Yes. And I took her outside and showed her the grave, so that she could tell Mr. Weckler about it when he got up."

I thought then of our early-morning work. Bill had wondered whether or not the cat had been strangled before the attack on the old man or afterwards. We knew now, from what Mrs. Clayton had told Poppy, that it was the cat's death cry, itself, that had gotten the awakened owner out of bed. Yet the puzzling question still hung before us: *Why* had the housebreaker killed the cat? What had been his object? Having invented some kind of a fearful cat-strangling machine, was it a mania

of his, or whatever you call it, to go around killing harmless cats? And, if so, did he sometimes pick off bigger stuff than cats? Boys, for instance, or even grown men? Of these thoughts, I had the sudden shivery feeling that Poppy and I, as treasure hunters, had best watch our "P's" and "Q's."

Coming within sight of the old stone house at exactly twelve o'clock, the leader suddenly was reminded of something.

"Say, Jerry, I haven't told you yet about the bad news."

That was so! In the morning's excitement I had forgotten all about it. But I wasn't particularly worried.

"It can't be any worse than the rotten pickles," I grinned. "So spit it out."

"Last Thursday when I was in Rockford, my cousin, who works in a wholesale grocery store, took me down to the office to meet the boss. Our talk was mostly about cucumber pickles. Mr. Wiggins was very much interested in our new pickle business. I spread a lot of gab, I guess. And what do you know if I didn't talk him into giving me an order for two thirty-gallon barrels! Being Henny's cousin helped, I suppose. Anyway, whether it was that or just my line of gab, I got the order. Boy, did I ever feel big! If we could sell barreled pickles to him, my imagination began to jump around, why

couldn't we sell them by the barrel to other wholesalers? I was sure that we could. And so that we would have plenty of cucumbers to work on, and thus be able to fill the whopping big pickle orders that we were going to get, I telegraphed to Mrs. O'Mally, telling her that we'd buy her whole cucumber crop."

"What?" I squeaked, staring at him.

"At two dollars a bushel."

It was so much worse than what I had expected that I lost my voice. I could only stare. Finally, though, I got my voice back again, after a lot of gurgling and neck-stretching. I tightened up my wabbly legs, too. And remembering that he was my best pal regardless, I shoved out a fumbling paw.

"Poppy," says I, wondering what made it so blamed hot all of a sudden, "since I've known you you've made some beau-tiful high dives. But this is one time, kid, when you sure landed flat on your little tummy. Seven hundred bushels of cucumbers at two dollars a bushel! Wow!" I drew a deep breath. Boy, it sure was hot! "But it's you and me, kid," I went on, pumping his arm up and down, with the sweat running. "That's the way we started; and that's the way we're going to finish." Then I tried to be enthusiastic. "Anyway," says I "who knows but what we may be able to think up

a scheme for making cucumber watch charms or fancy green doo-dads for ladies' hats? So don't start twiddling your thumbs now, old hunk. Use your beezer. It looks just as good to me as it ever did . . . on the outside. And if you can't get action any other way, swallow a bumblebee."

We were walking slower now.

"What are we going to tell Mrs. O'Mally?" says he, looking ahead.

"Why not wait and see what she tells us?"

"But suppose she asks us for money?"

"Write her out a check," I made a big gesture. "We still have thirty-two dollars in the bank."

He sort of squeezed my arm.

"Jerry," says he, "you're a little brick. I really didn't think you'd take it so—so cheerful-like. In fact, considering how I had jumped into it without telling you, I thought you'd be a little bit sore. And I was all ready to have you pounce on me and call me a dumb-bell."

Lots of times we slam-bang the "dumb-bell" stuff at each other in fun, as I have written down. But to call that kid a dumb-bell in earnest would be like telling a lily to go out in the kitchen and wash its face. No, sir, a dumb-bell was one thing he wasn't. *Ambition* was what had tripped him up. His ideas were too big for his shoes. So, in a way, it isn't to be wondered at that he had taken a flop.

Of course, as his partner, he should have gotten my advice before ordering the cucumbers. But I wasn't going to crab at him on that point. For he always took the lead, anyway. And any scheme to save us would come out of his head, not mine.

Having passed into the well-kept yard, I took a squint out back, expecting to see a young cucumber mountain. But nothing of that kind was in sight. Nor were the pickers at work, this being Sunday.

A few chickens ran out to meet us, as though expecting to be fed, and at the side porch a big cat jumped out of a chair. Rapping on the screen door, we heard footsteps. Presently Mrs. O'Mally came into sight.

"Come in," she invited, holding the door open. In the careful housekeeping way that many women have, she brushed out a fly or two with her apron. "I was wonderin'," she added, looking at us warmly, "if ye wouldn't be out to-day to see your cucumbers. 'Tis a whole cellar full that I have for ye. Come! I'll show 'em to ye."

"There's no hurry," says Poppy, noticing that the woman had gotten up from the dinner table. "We'll just sit down and wait till you're through eating."

There's something particularly fine about Mrs. O'Mally. Like Mother. When you're around her

you sort of have the feeling that she likes you and wants you to know about it. Of course, she probably doesn't like everybody. But I know that she likes me! So I wasn't surprised when she warmly insisted on us sitting up to the table and eating dinner with her. Nor did we refuse. For that wouldn't have been polite.

"Sure," she bustled around, getting more stuff out of the kettles on the stove, " 'tis a much finer dinner I would have had for ye could I have known ahead of time that ye would be likely to drop in on me at this particular hour. But if ye have to skimp on the taters ye can have your fill of bread an' jam. Then, too, 'tis a fine three-layer cake I have in the pantry. An' pickles! Sure, I can give ye plenty of *them*. An' all fresh made, too."

"No, thanks," I grinned. "I'm not eating pickles to-day." Nor did Poppy, I notice, show any interest in the pickles.

"Did you know," says he, galloping into the food, "that the man who built this house used to have a big cucumber patch out back where your patch is?"

Coming out of the pantry with more bread on a plate, Mrs. O'Mally let the slices fall to the floor. And seeing her face, as it turned white at mention of the pirate, I kicked the leader under the table. She knew secret stuff, all right!

Later she took us down a flight of heavy stairs

into the deep, dungeon-like cellar, where a week's picking from the big cucumber patch had been put into one huge bin. One hundred and thirty bushels, she said proudly. I could imagine that she was saying "two hundred and sixty dollars" in her mind. And all we had in the bank was thirty-two dollars!

"I suppose," says she, "that you'll be comin' after 'em soon."

Poppy didn't say anything. He felt kind of sneaking, I guess. But, to that point, until we knew for sure that we were up a tree there was no sense in alarming her.

"Had I not known Jerry's pa and ma so well, I might have hesitated to save the cucumbers for ye, as the telegram said. But 'tis confidence I have aplenty in the Todd family. For who give me the fine woolen blankets for me bed last winter, when the snow was tin feet deep between here and the river road? No one but Miz Todd, herself. An' who come with a truck-load of coal, even shovelin' his way? Ye should know, Jerry, for 'twas that elegant pa of yours. Sure, I wanted to pay him for the coal, but would he take a penny? Not him! He had coal goin' to waste in the brickyard, he said, like the magnificent liar that he is, an' it was a great accommodation to find some one who could make good use of it." The old woman was dabbing at her eyes with the corner of her apron. "Yes, Jerry,"

she put a trembling hand on my shoulder, "'tis a fine pa and ma that ye have. An' if ye say 'tis me entire cucumber crop that ye want, God bless ye 'tis yours for the askin'. I can even wait for me money, if necessary."

I didn't say anything. But I was doing a lot of deep thinking. *This* showed how lucky a boy was to have a good pa and ma. Mrs. O'Mally trusted me because she trusted my folks. Old Poppy, I stiffened, as I saw where my duty lay, simply *had* to squeeze a winning scheme out of his beezer now. There were no "if's" or "and's" about that. For I saw that if we skidded on paying for the cucumbers it would be just the same as throwing dirt on the fine family reputation that Mother and Dad had been carefully building up all these years.

Tap! Tap! Tap! It was a slight sound. Faint and far-away. And under ordinary circumstances I might not have noticed it at all. For frequently sounds of no consequence carry a long distance in the earth, like the time in the Higby-ravine cave when we heard a farmer's water-pumping engine almost a mile away. This, though, was no such sound as that. It was more like even rock-hammer blows. Tap! Tap! Tap! Some one near us was working underground.

There was a cry from Poppy. And I wheeled to find him supporting Mrs. O'Mally

"Help me, Jerry. She's fainted!"

There was some excitement then, let me tell you. But, to the woman's good fortune, her fainting spell wasn't anything serious. Having carried her upstairs, she opened her eyes when we sprinkled water on her. And soon she was sitting up, quite as well as ever, except that she looked peculiarly white.

"This," says she, in a weary voice, "is the end. I'm goin' to move. I can stand it no longer. For me nerves is a wreck."

Then, to our amazement, she told us a strange story of ghostly raps and muffled hammer blows in the cellar walls. It had started about a month ago, she said. At first she had thought that it was rats. But she soon changed that belief. For no rats could have made the peculiar sounds that she heard, both day and night. Nor did the sounds, as she grew more familiar with them, seem earthly to her, which led to the superstitious conclusion that the house was indeed haunted. What she heard was a ghost! No doubt the ghost of the dead pirate, himself! Yet, poor as she was, and alone in the world, she had tried to fight down her fright. For if she let the ghost drive her out of the house she had no place else to go. Then, too, the fear of ridicule had kept her from going to the neighbors with her story.

We told her then about the gold cucumber and the things connected with it. What she had heard,

we said excitedly, wasn't a ghost, but the one-armed cat killer who was searching in the secret cellars of the old house for the balance of the pirate's hidden treasure, of which, no doubt, the one gold cucumber that he had found was the key.

"Mither of Moses!" she cried, with terrified eyes. "A cat killer, did ye say? 'Tis this very day I'll move out of here."

Poppy grinned.

"Don't you worry, Mrs. O'Mally. We aren't going to let him harm you. In fact, we're going to stay right here with you until we find out the truth about this queer old place. So, there now!" he further comforted her. "Just forget about your fears. And on top of taking good care of you, if we *do* find the hidden treasure, you're going to get a third of it. Don't forget about that."

Here a swell roadster drove into the yard.

"Young Pennykorn and his grandfather," Poppy rubbered.

"The ould skin-flint," says Mrs. O'Mally, watching the banker with unfriendly eyes as he got out of the car and started stiffly toward the house. "He has let me pile up cucumbers all week, thinkin' that he could come here to-day an' Jew me down. I know *him*. But thank the good Lord this is one time when I'm safe from his clutches—graspin' ould miser that he is!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE BANKER'S THREATS

MRS. O'MALLY got all ready to go to the door, expecting to hear the visitor knock. But instead, after a searching glance at the house, which made us think that he was wishing in his grasping way that he could chuck it into his pocket and make off with it, as another one of his possessions, he continued his stiff-legged walk in the direction of the big cucumber patch.

Rubbering through the kitchen window, we saw him go the full length of the patch on one path and back on another, stopping every few steps to poke around among the green vines with a stick. Once he picked a cucumber and bit into it. Evidently it suited him, for we could see him nod his head. His curiosity satisfied at the patch, he stopped at the car on his return to say a few words to his cute little grandson, who was half asleep in the comfortable seat, after which he came on to the house, rapping authoritatively at the front door.

Poppy and I, of course, kept out of sight. For the banker's business with Mrs. O'Mally wasn't our

business. So the admitted visitor didn't know that we were in the same house with him.

"I have been out back inspecting your cucumber patch, Mrs. O'Mally," the conversation began, and while the speaker was seated out of our sight we could imagine from the tone of his voice how very dignified he looked. This was a trick of his, of course, wealthy man that he was, to make Mrs. O'Mally feel sort of insignificant. "The patch seems somewhat larger to me this year."

"I added two acres."

"The same seed, I judge."

"Yes, sor."

"You are having unusually good luck with cucumbers, Mrs. O'Mally."

" 'Tis not so much luck, sor, as patience an' hard work."

"The vines, I noticed, are set full, with every prospect of a heavy yield."

"With no bad luck from the weather, I expect to pick at least seven hundred bushels."

"Seven hundred bushels!" The man made it sound like an ocean full. "How many bushels was it that we bought from you last season?"

"Four hundred an' fifteen."

"An increase of almost three hundred bushels!" There was a short silence. "I'm wondering, Mrs. O'Mally," then came thoughtfully, "if our factory

will be able to handle your entire crop. For you realize, of course, that our pickle line is somewhat of an experiment. And hence, at the start, it would be rash for us to go into it too heavily."

"I was told, sor, that your new pickle line was a big success."

"Of course; of course. We have nothing to complain of. But, still, we are not established in that branch. Far from it. So we must proceed with proper business caution."

"Which, I take it, is to the p'int that ye hain't wantin' me whole crop."

"I—ah—would want to confer with my son, Mrs. O'Mally, before definitely committing myself. Still, it is not improbable that Norman will be able to shape his production plans so as to absorb your entire crop of seven hundred bushels or thereabouts, providing, of course, that the price is right."

"Ah! . . ." The pickle woman's voice had a stiffer tone. "Then ye think I'm gettin' rich too fast at a dollar a bushel."

"Here is the situation, Mrs. O'Mally: On one hand we have what promises to be an over-supply of green cucumbers, which, of course, is your problem. On the other hand an unwise over-supply of high-priced pickles would be our problem. So, as I see it, the thing for us to do, to your best interests and to ours, is to get together on a price that will enable

us to buy your whole crop, to save you loss from waste, and also without risk to ourselves. We can do it in one of two ways: The first four hundred bushels will be priced at a dollar a bushel, as this will be the cream of the picking, the next hundred bushels at ninety cents, and the balance at seventy cents, which will give you, net, six hundred and thirty dollars for the total estimated crop of seven hundred bushels, or an average of—ah—ninety cents a bushel. That is one plan, as I say. The other plan would be to pay ninety cents straight, in which case we would agree to take all you have, even if the crop runs as high as eight hundred or even nine hundred bushels. I trust I am not confusing you with these figures."

"Oh, I know what ye mean, all right," came bluntly. "You're tryin' to get me cucumbers for ninety cents a bushel."

"Everything considered," the oily voice went on, "that is, I am sure, a very fair price. As I say, it protects you from possible loss through waste, and it protects us in case we have to cut our price to the jobber on account of unwise over-production. The question is, will you be willing to accept ninety cents a bushel, with the understanding, of course, that we will absorb your entire crop? Or will you want to look around for another possible market? We have no strings on you, Mrs. O'Mally, and if

you can sell your crop elsewhere, for more money than we can afford to pay you, that is your privilege. As a matter of fact, with your best interests at heart, I wouldn't want to see you lose a penny on our account. It is our misfortune, seemingly, that we can pay you no more, much as we would like to do so. But, as our pickle business is in its infancy, as I have mentioned, we must be properly conservative."

Poppy and I hadn't missed a single word of the old geezer's gab. He sure had a slick line, all right. But he didn't fool us for one minute.

"What do you think of him, Jerry?" a whisper came in my ear.

"He's an old liar."

"Doesn't it surprise you?"

"I'd like to surprise *him,*" I gritted, as Mrs. O'Mally's friend.

"I guess he'd be surprised, all right," came the grinning reply, "if he knew we were listening."

In calling the banker an old liar I was thinking, of course, of the business conversation we had overheard in the bank. Not only was the new pickle line a whopping big success, if we were to believe what we had heard, but convinced that this success would keep up, and steadily grow bigger, the company, as we knew, had already made plans to start

up a separate pickle factory in Ashton. And here he was letting on to Mrs. O'Mally, in his smooth, oily way, that her cucumbers would be a drag on his hands. Just to get more wealth!

Money is bully good stuff to have. When I grow up I'm going to earn a lot of it and get a lot of fun out of it. But, bu-lieve me, if I ever try to earn a penny by cheating another person—least of all a poor old woman—I hope somebody with decency will meander into sight and crack me a good one on the back of the bean.

So, having separated myself from this little spiel, you know what *I* thought about Mr. Foreman Pennykorn!

And not a bit sorry was I now that we had the big cucumber crop on our hands, though, as I have written down, when Poppy first sprung the news on me I had taken it as a sort of calamity. It would be fun to turn the cucumbers into money under the banker's very nose. I hadn't any idea how we were going to do it. But I had the fighting feeling, all of a sudden, that we could do it. Old skin-flint, as Mrs. O'Mally called him. We'd fix him.

" 'Tis glad I am to hear ye say, Mr. Pennykorn," the pickle woman went on with the conversation, "that ye would like to have me sell me cucumbers where I can get the best price for 'em."

"Not for one minute, Mrs. O'Mally, would we

want to stand in your way," purred the old fraud, who, of course, was chuckling inside over the smug thought that his factory was the only market that the cucumber raiser had. "For we always want to do what is right and fair to all. That is our policy. Sometimes the farmers think our prices are too low. But it is a fact that we always pay as much as we can. Yet, I know how the farmers feel. Money is money to all of us. And I dare say that a hundred dollars means even more to a poor person, and particularly to an old lady like you, than to a struggling business such as ours."

A "struggling business!" And he and his son had talked of "cleaning up" fifty thousand dollars in this one year alone! Of all the two-faced old skunks!

"An' how much was it that the seven hundred bushels would bring me at ninety cents a bushel?" Mrs. O'Mally inquired.

"Six hundred and thirty dollars."

"An' it would honestly please ye, ye say, to know that I could sell me cucumber crop for more than that?"

The banker hadn't expected this question.

"Six hundred and thirty dollars is a lot of money, Mrs. O'Mally. And if you have any thought of looking around—"

"I have no need to look around, sor."

"Fine! We will use you right, of course. For, as I say, that is our fundamental policy."

"You misunderstand me, Mr. Pennykorn. I said I have no need to look around. For me entire crop has been sold."

Right then, I guess, is when old pussy-foot got the surprise of his lifetime.

"Sold?" he choked, springing stiffly to his feet.

"At two dollars a bushel," says Mrs. O'Mally, as sweet as you please.

For a moment or two the banker hadn't any voice.

"Madam, is this true?"

"Can ye doubt it, sor, to see me happy face? Fourteen hundred dollars as ag'inst six hundred an' thirty dollars! Sure, I feel rich. An' 'tis fine, Mr. Pennykorn, to know that ye are glad with me."

Well, say! When Poppy and I heard that we almost busted right out. For you can imagine how "glad" the banker was. Oh, yes, he was about as glad as you would be if your folks sent you down town to the dentist on your birthday to have three or four teeth pulled.

"Mrs. O'Mally," he drew himself up, as we could see by watching him in the kitchen mirror, "you had no right to sell your cucumber crop to an outsider without first consulting us."

"Sure," says the woman, pretending innocence, "ye take a strange view of me good fortune, Mr.

Pennykorn, considerin' how anxious ye was a moment ago to have me sell where I could get the most money. 'Tis almost displeased that ye act, sor."

"You know that we were figuring on your cucumber crop."

"Well, if the lack of it is goin' to cripple ye, ye may be able to get the new buyers to divvy up with ye."

"At two dollars a bushel? We'll never pay such an outrageous price!"

Here footsteps sounded on the side porch. And wheeling, who should Poppy and I see in the door but young smarty. His eyes sure stuck out when he saw us. Then around the house he went on the tear, tumbling in through the front door.

"Hey, Grandpop! That Ott kid and monkey-face Todd are listening in the kitchen."

Monkey-face!

"Get me an ax," says I, rolling up my sleeves.

Poppy showed himself.

"There he is, Grandpop. That's him. He's the kid who started that Pickle Parlor in front of our office."

The banker looked startled for a moment or two. Then his face darkened.

"What's the meaning of this?" he thundered.

But it takes more than a rumble to scare Poppy.

"The meaning is," says he, "that you're an hour and fifteen minutes late. For having gone into the pickle business ourselves, and needing a big supply of cucumbers, we got here ahead of you and contracted for Mrs. O'Mally's entire crop."

The banker's eyes were blazing now.

"Do you realize that you are directly interfering with a hundred-thousand-dollar corporation?"

Poof! A hundred thousand dollars wasn't anything to excite Poppy.

"What of it?" says he.

The man swallowed.

"What of it!" he boomed, his temper getting away from him more than ever. "Young man, we'll take this nonsensical business of yours and crush it under our heel like an egg shell."

"If you go stepping on us," says Poppy, "you may find that we're egg shells with hard-boiled centers. And instead of crushing us, you're liable to skid and jar the kink out of your whiskers."

Boy, oh, boy, was that man ever furious!

"You'll pay for this insolence," he further thundered.

"You bet your boots," smarty bounced in. "You can't monkey with us. For we've got money."

"Money doesn't count for much," says Poppy, giving the kid a dig, "if you haven't got brains to go with it."

"Mrs. O'Mally's a fool to sell her cucumbers to you kids. For she'll never get her pay. You with your rotten pickles!" he turned up his nose at us. "A pig couldn't eat 'em."

"How do you know?" says I. "Are you the pig that tried?"

The banker now turned on Mrs. O'Mally.

"I'll give you until to-morrow noon to cancel your silly negotiations with these boys and sign your entire crop over to us."

"No signature will ye get from me at ninety cents a bushel."

"Unless we can come to these terms we'll sue you for breach of contract."

"We have no contract."

"We have a verbal understanding. And that will hold good in law."

Mrs. O'Mally was getting mad now.

"Scoundrel!" she cried. "Get out of me house before I take a broom an' chase ye out."

"Try putting us out," smarty swelled up, "and see what you get."

"A chip of the ould block," Mrs. O'Mally handed it to him.

"Why not make it a chip of the old blockhead?" I put in, which wasn't very nice of me, I know, considering that the crack partly hit an old man. But, ding bust it, I've never been sorry to this day that

I said it. For what that old cheat tried to do to us!

"I'll soak you for that," flared smarty.

"Go ahead and soak," I dared him.

The banker started off.

"Remember," he shot at Mrs. O'Mally, "you have until to-morrow noon to come to our office and sign our contract. As for you, you young whippersnappers," he turned on us, with eyes full of hatred, "I give you your orders now to drop this interference in our business affairs and move that Pickle Parlor of yours back in the alley where it came from."

"*Some* Pickle Parlor!" smarty threw at us.

"Yes," I shot back at him, "and I know a guy about your size who'll have *some* hump on the end of his nose if you don't hurry up and do the evaporating act."

"Say, kid," says he, swelling up like a fighting rooster, "let me whisper something to you: Every morning before breakfast I strangle six guys bigger'n you are just to get up an appetite."

Monkey-face! I couldn't get that out of my mind.

"When you get to town," says I, "go around by the undertaker's and pick out a coffin. For I'm going to get *you*."

A few minutes later the car shot out of the yard in a cloud of dust.

"The scoundrel!" cried Mrs. O'Mally, white and

trembling, but still mad enough to bite a tenpenny nail in two. "*Me* sign his paper? I'll go to the poorhouse first."

"You won't need to go to the poorhouse," says Poppy, "if we can find the pirate's treasure." Then he motioned to me. "Come on, Jerry. Let's get busy."

CHAPTER XIV

UNDERGROUND

PUTTING the Pennykorn gang out of our minds for the time being, Poppy and I again took up the peculiar puzzle of the one-armed cat killer. He sure was a big hunk of mystery, all right. The crazy things that he had done in Tutter you already know about. Less than three hours ago, after having followed us to the church, he had given us the slip in broad daylight. And here he was in the secret cellars of the pirate's house pounding away with his tack hammer as unconcerned as you please, seemingly with as little fear of detection as he had shown at the church. Had he followed us here, too? Or had he left town ahead of us? We wondered.

What he was after, of course, in this secret work of his, was the balance of the hidden treasure. Having found one of the gold cucumbers he naturally wanted the whole caboodle. To believe Mrs. O'Mally's story, he had been working here, like a hidden ghost, for a month or more. That he was still on the job, with a tap! tap! here and a tap! tap! there, as the old scout song goes, proved that

the crafty pirate had put his treasure away in some peculiarly secure place. But where had the man gotten his clews to the hidden treasure in the first place? Further, where was the secret entrance to these mysterious underground rooms that enabled him to come and go in broad daylight without detection? And, most puzzling of all, considering his cat-killing mania, who was he?

With nothing in the cellar now except green cucumbers and silence, we were led to believe that the mysterious worker had gone off somewhere to take a rest. So we got busy and did some extensive wall tapping ourselves, with the big hope, of course, that we would be successful in locating a hollow section in the heavy masonry. But the guy who did the needle-sleuthing stuff in the haystack had an easier job than us. For those cellar walls sounded about as hollow as a butcher's chopping block. The secret doors, it would seem, were a myth.

As I have written down, the cellar was deep and dungeon-like. It was full of creeping shadows, too. Shadows that had twisting octopus arms one minute and spider-like legs the next. I didn't like it for two cents. I kept thinking of that iron jigger that had grabbed the poor cat. And other stories of murders believed to have been committed here ran through my mind. Sniffing, I could almost imagine that the dank air was heavy with the smell of blood.

"THE SCOUNDREL!" CRIED MRS. O'MALLY, WHITE AND TREMBLING.

Like a slaughterhouse. However, when I told Poppy what I was sniffing about he said that it was a dead-rat smell, after which he went upstairs, in further wall tapping, but to no better success.

We then went over the outside walls inch by inch, not only tapping, but searching, as with a microscope, for a possible secret door, on the order of those amazing secret doors that we bumped into while working on the mystery of the spotted gander, as related in an earlier book, POPPY OTT AND THE GALLOPING SNAIL. At the end of our work we were dead sure that there were no secret doors here. So, unless the man got into the hidden rooms from within the house, which seemed impossible, the only other view to take was that he did the trick from underground.

"Didn't you tell me something about a tunnel, Jerry?"

"I've heard there *is* a tunnel," I answered.

"But you haven't seen it?"

"No," I shook my head.

If there *was* a tunnel leading from the river to the stone house, with a secret entrance at the cellar end, certainly we ought to be able to find it, the leader said. But here again we bumped our noses against a solid brick wall, as the saying is. And after an hour's unsuccessful search up and down the shore of the river, where the bank for the most part was

nothing but a mud-baked slope sprinkled with willows, we came to the conclusion that the "tunnel" also was a pipe dream.

Cutting a willow club for myself, with the thought that I might need it before the night was over, I came back to the shore to find Poppy staring across the wide stretch of water at the sandstone bluffs that have been given earlier mention in my story.

"Quick, Jerry!" he beckoned.

What he had seen was a man in a rowboat, nothing unusual in itself except that the boatman, who was little more than a speck to us, disappeared into one of the unfrequented canyons, sort of pushing the boat along with a pole.

Poppy, of course, as could have been expected of him under the circumstances, was now bound and determined to cross the river. And remembering about old Cap'n Tinkertop's hidden rowboat, I led the way to the sheltered mouth of Weir creek. But the boat was gone! And then the truth of the situation slowly percolated into my bean. It was the Cap'n's boat that we had seen across the river. The one-armed man had stolen it, which explained why the boat, as we had gotten a glimpse of it at a distance, was being pushed along with a pole.

Poppy's interest switched quickly from the cat killer to the creek.

"Where does it go to?" says he, rubbering up-

stream through the bushes that cluttered the banks.

"I never followed it," I told him, "so I can't tell you."

Using a willow pole as a measuring stick, he thus learned that the water in the middle of the narrow stream was up to his neck.

"Hot dog!" he cried, jumping with excitement.

"What wonderful discovery have you made now?" says I.

"Don't you catch on, Jerry?" he laughed. "The pirate used this creek as a sort of hidden harbor. For he was too foxy, let me tell you, to have his secret tunnel open directly on the river. So the thing for us to do is to follow the creek until we come to shallow water. And then, kid, don't be surprised if we *do* find an underground tunnel, after all. Come on, Jerry!" and off he tore through the thicket like a house afire.

The creek, as we followed it, keeping as close to the banks as possible, wound here and there, as such streams do. So far as we could determine the depth in the middle was never less than two feet, which was plenty deep enough for a flat-bottomed skiff. There was no current, which showed that the stream, in spite of its name, was really nothing more than a bayou. Still, was my conclusion, it probably had some kind of a feeder up ahead, if nothing more than the occasional overflow of the

canal. There was a heavy growth of slough moss here, but the channel was noticeably open, and we fancied, as we pushed and pulled our way through the dense willows, that we could see places here and there where the one-armed man had jabbed his pole into the moss.

Presently the leader gave a triumphant shout.

"Look, Jerry!" he parted the willows. "There's the old stone house."

Sure enough, we had circled until now we were not more than thirty or forty rods from the pirate's house, in a low strip commonly called the "Weir jungle." And were we ever excited! Oh, boy! As the saying is, we were getting "warmer" every minute.

It was no trick for us to pick out the exact spot on the creek bank where the boatman had landed. And so frequent had been his trips here during the past month that a path, which led off to the right, showed plainly. Following this path, with a sharp lookout ahead, we soon came to what seemed to be the mouth of an abandoned cement tunnel, similar to dozens of other old tunnels that I had seen in and around Tutter. I never had known, though, that any early tunneling for cement rock, which underlies the floor of the valley, had been done here.

"I wish we had a light," said Poppy, rubbering into the black hole.

"Gosh!" I sort of held off. "Wouldn't you be afraid to go in there?"

"What's the risk," says he, "when we know that the one-armed geezer is on the other side of the river?"

It was our theory now that the treasure hunter, living in one of the hidden caves across the river, was resting there for a few hours. So I ran back to the stone house for a flashlight, as eager as the leader was to do the exploring act.

Mrs. O'Mally nearly had a fit when she learned what we were planning to do.

"Please don't," she begged, thinking, I guess, of the fix that we would be in if the one-armed man came back to the tunnel sooner than we expected. "Ye may be killed."

But I didn't let her scare me.

"Don't you worry about us," I laughed. Then, ready to go, I told her to listen for us through the cellar walls. We'd give five quick taps, I said.

If you think that a cellar is a cool place, you ought to wrap yourself in a hunk of mosquito netting some blistering-hot July day and stroll around in a cement tunnel. You'd soon lose your sweaty feeling. It's strange to me where the cold air comes from. Still, I guess it's much the same with coal mines or any other kind of underground places. For my part, though, I'll take the good old sunshine,

even when the thermometer has its neck stretched out full length.

The pirate's tunnel, as we now called the underground passageway, seemed cooler to me, once we got into it, than the average old tunnel of its kind. As we went deeper into the icy hole, where everything beyond the reach of our flashlight was as black as pitch, we not only stopped every few seconds to listen, but we doused our light, thinking that if we stood in the darkness we could better pick up another moving light, either ahead of us or behind us. But we heard nothing. Neither did we see anything.

As you may never have been in a cement tunnel, especially an old one, I'll describe what this tunnel was like. The floor, of course, like the walls and the seven-foot roof, was of solid rock, perfectly flat, but cluttered with countless fallen chunks. The walls, about twelve feet apart, were sort of jagged, showing the way nature had put the rock together in layers. Oak posts, or "props," as we call them, held up the roof. Some of these timbers, as picked up by our flashlight, looked pretty rotten to me. And I wondered, sort of anxious-like, if they hadn't just about come to the end of their usefulness. At one place a hunk that must have weighed hundreds of tons had fallen out of the roof, leaving a gaping black hole. I was glad when we had passed this

dangerous spot. For I had the feeling that there might be more stuff up there ready to do the tumbling-down act. And not for one second did I want any young cement-rock mountain to tumble down on top of *me*.

Here and there we saw traces of the old two-rail track over which the early mule-drawn dump-cars had carried the raw rock into the daylight, to be later hauled away to the mill. Some of the ties were so rotten that they went together under our feet like a sponge. At one place we waded ankle deep through a pool of icy water. Br-r-r-r! Deep in the tunnel now, the walls on both sides of us were wet and dripping. Cold drops came down from the ceiling on my head. It made me think of spiders. And I sure hate spiders.

Tunnel exploring such as this was new stuff to Poppy, so, naturally, as it is his nature to want to know all the "why's" and "wherefore's" of everything, he had a hundred questions to ask me. I told him what I knew about cement work, explaining that the new mill in Tutter was fed by rock that was "stripped" instead of "tunneled," as the tunneling process was considered out-of-date. In the places where the stripping was done, called quarries, the workmen frequently tapped artesian veins, and that, I said, was how we came to have those dandy swimming holes south of town, of which the "fourth

quarry," as you may recall, entered so prominently into my book, JERRY TODD AND THE WALTZING HEN.

But aside from the unusual features of the tunnel, itself, we saw nothing of special interest. Certainly, to our great disappointment, we saw no "treasure" chests, or, for that matter, anything that had a "pirate" look to it.

The tunnel ended in a chamber of good size, the walls of which were unbroken except for the entrance. Plainly this was as far as the early miners had gone. Were we now under the old stone house? We wondered. Certainly, was our conclusion, we had been traveling in that general direction. But we saw no break in the chamber roof, which, like the narrower passageway, was supported by oak props.

"Let's yell," says I. "Maybe if we're as close to the house as we think, Mrs. O'Mally will hear us."

So we whooped it up at the top of our voices. The sound was deafening to us. But we got no answer.

Going back to the mouth of the passageway, after having spent an unsuccessful hour underground, we found ourselves wondering if the river pirate had helped to build this tunnel, or whether, after it had been abandoned, he had just copped it for his own use, upon learning, possibly, that it ran under his house.

"Glory be!" cried Mrs. O'Mally, when we showed up safe and sound. So full of joy was she that she even tried to hug us! But that was all right with me. I don't mind letting an old lady hug me. "Sure, 'tis a burden that has been lifted off me mind at sight of ye. An' what luck had ye?"

"No luck at all," says Poppy. Then he told her about us yelling.

"Didn't you hear us?"

"Sure, I was expectin' to hear ye. An' the continued silence was what set me to worryin'."

Somewhat to my surprise Mother and Dad drove into the yard about five o'clock. The doctors had operated on Mr. Weckler, they said, and the old man was getting along all right, though he was still out of his head.

"He seems to think that his daughter Clara is in the next room," says Mother. "And they say it's very pitiful to hear him begging her to come to him."

"Is his daughter dead?" says I, remembering how sad the old man had acted that day in the orchard.

"The general opinion is that she is dead. For she hasn't been seen or heard of since the time when she ran off to get married, more than twenty years ago."

The two women then got their heads together in "pickle" talk. And learning that our car had come

here purposely to take home a bushel of cucumbers, I lugged them out of the cellar.

Mother was running around with a cucumber pickle in each hand.

"Oh! . . ." she took on, like she does when she sees a new baby or an unusual crochet pattern. "Aren't they *per*-fectly delicious? Have you tried them, Jerry?"

"No, thanks," I shrugged.

I told her then that Poppy and I were going to stay all night on the cucumber farm. Mrs. O'Mally wanted us to, I said. For she had been hearing strange sounds. I caught Dad looking at me curiously. He realized, of course, that my chum and I were up to something. But he didn't ask me any questions, realizing, I guess, that I was looking forward to the fun of surprising him.

Mrs. O'Mally lugged out a swell supper for us. And then we sat around until it got dark. The air, after the day's heat, was sort of stagnant. And as though begging for a cooling shower a bullfrog army lined up in chorus on the river bank. Then the katydids got busy. *See-e-e*-saw! *See-e-e*-saw! They seemed to be very busy "sawing" something. I wondered what it was. Down near the mouth of the creek an owl shook itself awake and went, "Whoo-o-o-o! Whoo-o-o-o!"

"Lively stuff, huh?" laughed Poppy.

I didn't say anything. But somehow I had the shaky feeling, as I watched the moon come up, that it was going to be plenty lively enough for us before morning. A fellow very frequently gets a premonition like that, or whatever you call it. You know what I mean.

CHAPTER XV

MIDNIGHT EXCITEMENT

Now that it was dark, with the shadows banked up around the old stone house like prowling black monsters from the river, would the one-armed treasure hunter come back through the tunnel to the secret rooms to resume his work? We hoped so. And it was to catch the first possible sound of the mysterious worker that we now gathered in Mrs. O'Mally's front room with sharpened ears.

At first we had talked secretly of following the treasure hunter into the tunnel. But on discussion that plan had been dropped. For it was too much like starting in at the alley fence to open the front gate. What we needed, for quick work, was a direct opening into the secret rooms. And what better way for us to get started than to check up on the hidden pounder? Getting his general location, we could then do an effective trick with a pair of picks. Even if we had to amputate a whole wall Mrs. O'Mally wouldn't object. For see how much there was at stake! Maybe a million dollars in gold! Gee! Over three hundred thousand dollars apiece!

With talk like this going on, you can imagine how crazy we were to see the inside of these hidden

rooms that the river pirate had so strangely built under his stone house. What were they?—treasure vaults? And would we find whole stacks of crammed treasure chests? Probably not, came the more sensible thought, for if the gold cucumbers were so openly exposed as that the one-armed worker would have skinned out with them long ago. But no doubt there were old-time weapons of fearful history in the hidden rooms: muskets with bell barrels, blood-stained cutlasses, and dirks deeply knicked by human bones. Even more weird, we might find a skeleton or two. Wow! Could you imagine anything more exciting to a boy than to open up a place like that? And think of the later fun of searching for the hidden treasure!

Mrs. O'Mally's nervousness had now completely gone away. For she saw, all right, that she was perfectly safe in our hands. And I wish you could have seen the joy in her wrinkled face when we told her about the happy days that lay ahead of her, with no cucumbers to worry about, oodles of jack in the bank, and even old stiff-neck Pennykorn bowing to her respectfully as she gasolined down the boulevard in her ten-thousand-dollar Rolls-Royce.

Our talk then turned to old Mr. Weckler. And drawn into the conversation, the pickle woman told us things about the Weckler family that not only surprised us but sent our minds off on a new line

of speculation. The daughter, it seems, had eloped with a nephew of the old river pirate. Nathan Weir, Mrs. O'Mally went into details, had carried a bad reputation. That is why Mr. Weckler, with proper pride in his family, had refused to accept the man as his son-in-law. But the girl wasn't to be stopped. And now that so many years had passed away since she last had been heard from, it was generally concluded, as Mother had mentioned, that the runaway was dead, after a probably unhappy married life.

But here was the point that walloped Poppy and I between the eyes: A relative of the Weir family by marriage, Mr. Weckler had been struck down by the same man who was now searching for the pirate's hidden treasure, though as yet seemingly without success. Could it be, then came the exciting thought, that some motive deeper than intended common robbery had taken the one-armed treasure hunter to the house of our "silent" partner? Or, to express the same thought in another way, could it be that old Mr. Weckler, through his unhappy connection with the Weir family, was somehow or other mixed up in the secret of the hidden treasure, as it had been put away by his son-in-law's rascally uncle?

And how strange, too, was our further thought, that we should be drawn into this "cucumber" mys-

tery at the very time when we had turned our attention to cucumber pickles. First had come the "Pickle Parlor" idea, through which we had become associated with Mr. Weckler. Then, for reasons still unknown to us, but now under speculation, a housebreaker, whom we had every reason to believe was the one-armed treasure hunter, whose chief interest, outside of cat-strangling, was *gold cucumbers,* had strangely strewn cucumber pickles all over Poppy's cellar floor. At the time we had vaguely thought it was our "diamond" ad that had attracted the peculiar lawbreaker to the house. But now we wondered, with tangled minds, if, instead, the man hadn't marked us because of our associations with Mr. Weckler, whose house, as you know, had later been broken into. Then, in the "cucumber" chain, had come the discovery of the gold cucumber in the flower bed, followed quickly by the story of the pirate's cucumber mold. Including Mrs. O'Mally in the tangle, whose specialty was cucumbers, it was a befuddling "cucumbery" mess, to say the least.

The clock boomed away at intervals as it climbed the hill to the midnight peak. Then, at a quarter of twelve, just as Mrs. O'Mally was in the middle of a story in which an old lady in Ireland, who in drinking out of a pan of milk in the dark had swallowed a frog, we heard the familiar tap! . . . tap! . . . tap! . . . Getting on our tiptoes we ran from

wall to wall. Then, unable to locate the sound, we ran down cellar, Poppy leading with the flashlight, me next, then Mrs. O'Mally, then the big yellow cat. Tap! . . . tap! . . . tap! . . . We went from wall to wall. But to no success. For the sound came through one wall as distinctly as through another. The four walls, in fact, seemed to *carry* the sound, like a charged telephone wire.

Out of luck, as I say, we went back upstairs. The clock struck twelve. The ghost hour! I was peculiarly uneasy for a moment or two. I always feel that way at midnight. Then a sound came out of the cellar that literally turned me into an icicle—a sound so *hideous* and so *awful* that you, too, I think, had you been in my shoes, would have been completely scared out of your wits.

Poppy flashed by me.

"The cat!" he cried, and throwing open the cellar door he tumbled pell-mell down the stairs. Again that awful blood-curdling, choking, gasping cry cut my ears. And then, as though the deadly machine had completed its fearful work, the cellar was plunged into silence.

Knowing that the cat killer had secretly entered the cellar, to the death of her cat, Mrs. O'Mally fell helplessly into a chair. Her lips moved. But so great was her fright—I might say her *horrified* fright—that she could make no sound.

My own voice, as I called my chum's name, sounded faint and squeaky. "Poppy!" I called again. Then, as my legs began to lose their icy anchors, I managed to get to the head of the cellar stairs. *"Poppy!"* I called a third time.

But much less than getting an answer, there wasn't a sound.

I haven't a very clear recollection of what happened in the next few minutes. I completely lost my head, I guess. I thought I had the hand lamp, but discovered, when I started down the cellar stairs, that I had the goldfish globe. I got the lamp then. And pretty soon I found myself at the foot of the cellar stairs.

Poppy was gone! There wasn't a sign of him! That's why the cellar was so deadly quiet. Wherever the secret door was in these grim stone walls —and no longer could it be doubted that there *was* such a door—it was through this hidden opening that the cat killer had dragged my captured chum.

I was crazy now. All I could think of was that Poppy was in terrible danger. I ran around and around the cellar, the lamp chimney rocking in its metal socket. "Poppy!" I called again and again. *"Poppy!"* But there was no answer.

It was during one of these merry-go-round trips of mine that I discovered the cat's tail. A piece about two inches long, it lay beside the huge chim-

ney base in the center of the cellar. I gingerly picked it up—meaning the tail end and not the chimney base. There was fresh blood on it, proving that it had just been cut off. Ough! I wanted to drop it. But I felt I ought to keep it. I felt I ought to tell poor Mrs. O'Mally about the terrible crime. So, with the lamp in one hand, and the sticky tail in the other, I zigzagged up the stairs on high gear.

"It's all that's left of your cat!" I screeched, waving the tail at its horrified owner.

"No, no!" came the shriek, when I put the tail on the center table.

"But what'll I do with it?" I cried.

"Throw the nasty thing outside."

Well, I finally got some of my wits back. And I saw that the only way to help my chum was to lay for his captor at the mouth of the tunnel. So I grabbed my willow club. Then I lit out. A thing that helped me was the moonlight. Finally I came to the creek. There was the boat pulled up on the shore! I knew now that the man was still in the tunnel. So I ran along the path. And pretty soon I came to that awful black hole in the ground.

I listened. But I couldn't listen very good for my panting apparatus made too much noise. My heart was pounding, to. Two, three, four minutes passed. I wasn't panting so hard now. But how-

ever much I stretched my ears I could hear no sound of footsteps or distant underground voices. Suddenly, though, I did catch the sound of something behind me. Boy, did I ever jump! Coming out of the willows was a black shape that crawled along, animal-like, on its stomach. Or was it a man on his hands and knees? Anyway, whatever it was, animal or man, I knew that its burning eyes were fastened on *me*. This was more than I could stand. And screeching bloody murder I lit out on the tear for the stone house. Scooting along, I expected every minute to feel the awful thing grab my heels. But I got away from it.

Tumbling into the house, who should I see, first of all, to my great joy and amazement, but Poppy! Yes, sir, not an apparition, or whatever you call it, but old Poppy, himself, with his hair all mussed up and his shirt-tail hanging out. He and Mrs. O'Mally were bending over the couch. And when I got closer I saw that they were working on a boy.

"Is he dead?" I gasped, everything else going out of my mind.

"Unconscious," says Poppy, bathing the boy's forehead with a wet towel. Then he looked up. "Ever see him before, Jerry?"

It was a boy about our age. With his closed eyes and white face it was hard, of course, to tell exactly what he looked like. But there was nothing about

him that seemed familiar to me. Certainly, was my conclusion, he wasn't a kid from my own neighborhood.

"Uncle Abner!" the boy whispered, with a sort of convulsive movement of his arms. "Uncle Abner!"

"Do you know him?" Poppy asked me again.

"No," I shook my head.

CHAPTER XVI

THE MAN IN THE CAVE

HAVING completely forgotten about the supposedly strangled cat, you can imagine how my eyes popped out when the bobtailed mouse catcher unexpectedly meandered into the sitting room.

"Meow!" it broadcasted unhappily.

"An' it had such a pretty tail, too," sighed Mrs. O'Mally.

I was still staring.

"But how did it escape the cat killer?" I cried. And then, as my mind took in a wider and more important sweep, I inquired of my chum how he had escaped the cat killer, too.

"Our 'cat killer,' Jerry, instead of being a one-armed man, has turned out to be a boy."

"Him?" I switched my staring eyes from the cat to the unconscious form on the couch.

Nodding, the leader then told me what had happened in the cellar.

"As you remember, I ran down the stairs with a flashlight, determined to get a squint at the cat killer this time before he could make his usual

slick get-away. But the cellar was empty. The cat, though, was still yowling bloody murder. I tried to spot it, thinking now, from the choked sound, that a tub or box had fallen on top of it. But it, too, was gone. Finally, though, I traced it to the chimney base. You know how big the chimney base is. Right in the middle of the cellar floor, too. The cat was inside! And there on the floor was a piece of its tail! Instead of being solid brick, as we had supposed, I saw now that one whole side of the chimney base was made of sheet iron, painted to look like brickwork, and hung on hidden hinges. The quick closing of this secret door had trapped the snooping cat, not only catching it by the tail but completely cutting off the tip. The door, of course, hadn't opened and closed of its own accord. Hardly! And afraid that if I waited for you it might be locked on the inside, I gave the chimney corner a sharp tug, figuring that this was the edge of the secret door, and, sure enough, the whole west side of the chimney swung back as pretty as you please. This, of course, freed the cat, though not until it had lost the tip of its tail, as I say. Turning the flashlight into the chimney passage I saw the cat scooting down a flight of winding stairs. I went down the stairs, too, the door closing behind me. I was in a sort of well. Then I came to a room at the foot of the stairs. My flashlight picked up a

boy. I had expected to see a man! Lighting into him, we both dropped our flashlights. And for two or three minutes we tussled in the dark. What I aimed to do, of course, was to make a prisoner of him. I guess I soaked him pretty hard. Anyway, he took a back flop. When I saw that he had struck his head on the stone floor, and was unconscious, I lugged him up the winding stairs, and here he is."

Mrs. O'Mally brushed back the long black hair from the white forehead.

"A nice-lookin' b'y, too," says she, in her motherly way. "Sure, 'tis hard for me to think ill of him."

I told them then that they were dead wrong in calling the stranger boy the cat killer.

"It was the cat killer," I wound up, "that I saw in the willow patch."

Mrs. O'Mally was shivering over my story.

"How awful!" she cried. " 'Tis little wonder that ye were scared out of your wits."

"I thought at first that it was an animal, crawling along on its stomach. But now I'm sure that it was a man. And who more likely than the cat killer, himself?"

"Ough!" further shivered Mrs. O'Mally. "Quit talkin' about it. Sure, ye give me the creeps."

Coming to his senses, the kid seemed to be none the worse for his mishap. I saw now that he had

big black eyes. Nor were they sneaking eyes, either. Of course, after what had happened at the foot of the hidden stairs he showed no love for Poppy. But that was perfectly natural. If I had been banged around the way he had I would have been sore, too. But however much he glared at my chum, he showed no hatred for me. Instead, I caught him looking at me curiously.

Having failed to get a single word out of the stranger, Poppy drew me into the kitchen.

"What do you think of him, Jerry?"

"I've seen worse looking kids," says I.

"What gets me," came thoughtfully, "is his connection with the cat killer. The man must be a crook, for otherwise he wouldn't be breaking into people's houses. But I can't make myself believe that the boy is a crook."

"What are we going to do with him?" says I. "Keep him prisoner until we find the treasure?"

"We never could hold him, Jerry."

I saw what the leader meant. If we made a prisoner of the kid the one-armed man, on his side, would clean up on us in a jiffy. In fact, it was hardly to be doubted that the cat killer already had his eyes on us in evil plans.

"Let's lock the doors," I shivered.

I was crazy, of course, to see the hidden passageway that the leader had discovered in the chimney

base. But my increased fear of the one-armed cat killer was stronger than my curiosity. *Me* go down in that hole and run the chance of getting necked, like the church cat? No, thanks! I had had one narrow escape at the tunnel mouth. And that was enough for me.

Mrs. O'Mally told us afterwards that the kid watched the kitchen door like a hawk all the time we were out of his sight. For he knew, of course, that we were talking about him, and that seemed to worry him. But though we tried again to find out who he was, not a single word would he tell us about himself.

Poppy finally came to a plan.

"Say, Jerry," he drew me aside, "do you know where we can get a rowboat?"

"The kid's boat is in the creek," says I.

"No," he shook his head, "we've got to have another boat."

Getting the details of his scheme, I took a grip on my club and started out in the direction of the river bridge, two miles away, where old Deacon Pillpopper, who helped us solve the mystery of the ten-ring puzzle, as mentioned in my book, JERRY TODD AND THE TALKING FROG, runs a boat livery.

The moonlight was almost as bright as day. So by keeping away from the bushes and other shel-

tering things I felt pretty safe. Coming to the road, I lit out on the run, feeling that with every flying step I was leaving the shadowy, crawling thing farther behind me. Strangely, though, even when I was a mile from the house, I had the uncomfortable feeling that I was being watched. And from later developments I cannot doubt that I *was* watched.

It was two o'clock when I got the surprised and sleepy-eyed boat renter out of bed. Dickering with him for a minute or two, I then set off downstream. Boy, did I ever row! As I look back the wonder to me is that I didn't snap an oar. Coming within sight of the pirate's house, with its outstanding chimney, I pulled close to the shore. Then I gave one long "hoot" and three short ones, signifying "thirteen," which was the signal that Poppy and I had agreed upon.

Several minutes passed. Then I got the expected answering signal—"*Hoo-o-o-t! Hoot! hoot! hoot!*" —after which the "owl," himself, soon came into sight.

"The trick worked as slick as a button, Jerry," he laughed. "As soon as I got your signal I started to snore. The prisoner, of course, thought that I had dropped asleep. And quick as scat he stepped over my body, as I lay in front of his bedroom door, and skinned out."

The leader then asked me if I had seen anything of the cat killer on my way to the bridge. I hadn't, I said. Nor had he seen or heard anything of the man at the stone house, he then told me.

Piling into the boat we rowed for dear life, as it was our further scheme to beat the kid and his uncle across the river. In going to their cave they'd never suspect that we were following them, and so, by secretly listening in on their gab, we could get a good line on them.

"Hot dog!" says Poppy, as the other boat came out of the creek into the moonlit river. Flipping the oars harder than ever, we soon turned into the opposite canyon, where we waited in a dark water cave.

Dip! Dip! Dip! We could hear the other oars now. Then the boat came into sight.

"What the dickens? . . ." breathed Poppy, clutching my hand. "The kid's alone!"

In letting the prisoner escape, as a part of our scheme, we hadn't dreamed for an instant but what he and his rascally uncle would get together at the creek and quickly light out for home in their boat. We wondered now why the man had stayed behind. And we were uneasy, too, over Mrs. O'Mally. Letting the other boat pass us, we guardedly took in after it, keeping in the shadow of the towering wooded cliffs, now wrapped in a peculiar aban-

doned silence. The water didn't extend into the canyon very far, and presently we saw the kid land and scoot off into the trees, quickly passing from our sight. But fortunately I knew where the principal caves were. And it was our good luck to find a light in the first one that we came to.

Getting down on our stomachs we crawled like snakes from bush to bush. But it was a lucky thing for us that we didn't get too close to the enemy's hiding place. For all of a sudden the kid, himself, tumbled out of the cave and threw himself face downward in the bushes.

Within the cave a talking machine had come to life. I don't know what the tune was. I suspect, though, that it was a very old one. As a matter of fact, like Poppy, I was too amazed at the moment to pay any attention to tunes. The big thing in our minds was *why* the kid had turned on the talking machine in the first place, and *why* he was now hiding in the bushes.

We soon found out.

"Um . . ." came a sleepy yawn from within the cave. And at the unexpected sound Poppy caught his breath. I could imagine that he was doing some quick thinking. "Who in tunket turned that dum thing on?" a deep voice growled. "Tommy Weir! Did you do that?"

But the kid, if that was his name, didn't answer.

"*Tommy Weir!*" the voice was raised.

Still no answer from the kid.

"Drat that boy! Ought to have his setter warmed up good an' proper. TOMMY WEIR! Air you goin' to shet that thing off? Or will I have to git up an' take my cane to you?"

The kid still keeping silent, we heard the angry caveman get out of bed. Then a record that had been jerked from the silenced talking machine whizzed over the top of our heads.

Thump! thump! thump! A lame old man now stood, cane in hand, in the door of the cave. He had on a long white nightgown, and never in all my life had I seen another such bristly, mussed-up head of hair. He had whiskers, too—the "fringy" kind, stretching from ear to ear, with the chin and upper lip left bare. And what a grim, hard lip it was! Looking at him, as he stood there in the moonlight, I could imagine that the kid was in for a good beating.

"Tommy Weir! You git in here, now. Or I'll come out there an' lay it on you good an' proper."

To our surprise the kid got up laughing.

"What's the matter, Uncle Abner?"

"You young scallawag! Gittin' your pore ol' uncle out of his comfortable bed at this time of night. Hain't you 'shamed of yourself!"

"I wanted to tell you something, Uncle Abner," says the kid seriously.

"Um . . . You could 'a' let it wait till mornin'."

"No."

"*Tommy!*" cried the old man in sudden excitement. "You hain't meanin' that you've *found* it?"

"No."

"Well," came in disappointment, "what was it then?"

The two went into the cave out of sight.

"They caught me to-night, Uncle Abner."

"They? Who do you mean?—the Irish lady?"

"No. Two boys. One of them knocked me cuckoo."

"Um . . ." came severely. "It's what you git, Tommy Weir, for gallivantin' 'round on Sunday night, breakin' the Sabbath, when you should 'a' bin home studyin' your Bible lesson. Yes, you should! Jest because we're livin' here in a cave is no reason why you shouldn't go on with your Bible work. Them old lessons I've got saved up is jest as good as any new ones, fur the Bible is jest the same to-day as it was a hundred years ago. I ought to take a stick to you fur not mindin' me. . . . Where did they catch you?"

"In the room under the cellar."

"Two boys, you say?"

"They're staying there, I guess. They called

each other Poppy and Jerry. Jerry's all right. But if I ever get a crack at that other simp! Gr-r-r-r!"

"Tutter boys, prob'ly."

"I suppose so. Oh, gee! I guess it isn't any use, Uncle Abner," and I was struck by the weary, discouraged tone of the boy's voice. "I've searched and searched. But I don't seem able to find a thing. And now I wouldn't dare to go back if I wanted to. For the boys know about the secret door in the chimney. And they'd lay for me."

"Um . . . I'm all out of patience with you, Tommy Weir."

"Please don't scold, Uncle Abner."

"You need to have a good stick laid on you, you do."

I was beginning to see that the old man's threats, like his fierce expression, didn't amount to much.

"Did you ever hear of a cat killer, Uncle Abner?"

"A which?"

"A cat killer—a man who strangles cats. The boys asked me about it over and over, as though they thought *I* ought to know what they were talking about. And one of them says he *saw something* at the mouth of the tunnel. You know what I told you!"

"Tommy! Did he say it was *creepin'?*"

"Yes."

"An' *you* say it was creepin'?"

"Yes. I saw it in exactly the same place, too."

"Um . . . Did the boys finally turn you loose?"

"No. I got away from them."

"Heh?" the voice struck a sharper pitch. "What's that?"

The kid recited the story of his escape.

"Tommy," the old man snorted, "you're dumb. Yes, you be, an' you needn't look so indignant about it, nuther. You're a good boy in some ways, but you don't make enough use of your head."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, them boys let you git away on purpose. The one you call Poppy wasn't asleep at all. He was jest foxin'. Where was the other one?"

"I don't know."

"Outside, prob'ly. An' you never suspected that they was followin' you?"

"No."

Poppy chuckled in my ear.

"Uncle Abner isn't so dumb, huh?"

"Sh-h-h-h!" I hissed. "There he is."

Having again come to the door of the cave, the old man took a sweeping look here and there, as though studying the general lay of things, then pointed his cane directly at our hiding place.

"If they're here," says he sharply, "they're hidin' behind that bush. Fur it's the biggest an' nearest one."

NO KID CAN SCRAP AND SNEEZE AT THE SAME TIME.

Poppy Ott's Pedigreed Pickles.

Page 176

Gee! Caught by surprise we had no chance to dig out.

"Um . . ." old whiskers grunted savagely, as we stood up. "I thought as much. Now, jest march in here, you young scallawags, an' give an account of yourselves."

CHAPTER XVII

UNCLE ABNER'S STORY

FULL of curious admiration for the keen-eyed old man who had thus exposed us so cleverly and unexpectedly, Poppy and I filed sheepishly into the cave.

About fourteen feet in depth, the roomy chamber was furnished with a rustic table, over which hung a lantern, two chairs, and, on opposite sides, well back, two floor beds, the mattresses of which had been made of plaited grass. There was a stand, too, supporting a huge Bible, such as preachers use, and on a lower shelf of the stand was the talking machine that we had heard. Later we learned that the kid had made the furniture with a hatchet and scout knife, which shows you what a clever little woodsman *he* is.

The talk between the boy and his uncle had made it plain to us that much less than being in cahoots with the cat killer they really knew nothing about the other man, except that the boy had "seen something" at the mouth of the tunnel. This made the cat killer more of a mystery to us than ever. And

there was added mystery, too, in these other people. But who could be afraid of an old man, however stern he tried to be, whose chief interest seemed to be in Bibles and Sunday-school lessons! Certainly, Poppy and I weren't afraid. Our principal feeling, as I say, was curiosity.

The old man continued to glare at us.

"What's your name?" he demanded of the leader, in a gruff voice.

"Poppy Ott."

The questioner then turned as savagely to me.

"Jerry Todd," says I.

The scowl deepened.

"Which one of you hit my Tommy?"

The sight of us had sort of stupefied the kid. But now his eyes blazed up.

"It was him," he properly pointed.

"I took you for an enemy," Poppy explained his attack.

"For two cents," cried the kid, "I'd 'enemy' you with a crack on the jaw."

"Tommy!" came the sharp command. "You shet up an' keep still."

"I can lick him," the kid glowered.

'I'll do some 'lickin' in a minute or two if you don't mind me."

The old man's pretended fierceness was funny to us. More than that, with his whiskers and every-

thing, he looked funny. So it isn't surprising that Poppy grinned. And as though this was the final straw that tipped the hay cart over, or whatever the old saying is, the kid lit into the hated one like a young hurricane. For a minute or two all I could see was flying arms and legs. Over and over they rolled, whanging and banging each other like a couple of prize fighters. And, bu-lieve me, old Poppy had all he could handle! In the fracas the table was tipped over. Tin dishes clattered right and left. The old man tried to separate the fighters with his cane. Whack! whack! whack! But they paid no attention to the sharp cracks that he gave them. So he grimly got the pepper shaker. No kid can scrap and sneeze at the same time. So, for the present, at least, the battle was ended.

Nor were the two tousled fighters the only ones who dizzily contributed to the sneezing act. Boy, I thought I'd rip a hole in the top of my beezer. Uncle Abner spit his false teeth clean across the cave. Even the Bible stand rocked. But finally things sort of quieted down.

"Sech carryin' on fur Sunday night," stormed the old man, upon the recovery of his teeth. "I'm ashamed of you, Tommy Weir. Yes, I be. This other boy wasn't wantin' to fight. You're the one who started it."

"I'm going to knock his block off."

"That's enough from you, young man," came in thundering tones. "You go right over there an' set down on that bed. An' if you give me any more trouble I'm a-goin' to lay you across my knee."

"Aw! . . ." says Poppy, sort of buttoning himself together after the fracas. "He's all right. Let him be."

The old man then went at us with a bunch of questions. He was shrewd about it, too.

"I kin see," he nodded in conclusion, "that you boys know a great deal more about the secrets of the old stone house than you're willin' to admit. An' now that you've followed Tommy here, I kin imagine that you're curious to know who we be. To that p'int, to encourage frankness on your side, too, I don't mind tellin' you that my name is Abner Weir, more commonly known in Rimtown, Ohio, where our home is, as 'Uncle Ab.' Fortune has made me a nepher of the old rascal who built that house across the river. Asa Weir an' Severn Weir, my father, was brothers, Asa bein' much the oldest. Tommy, here, my nepher, is the only child of my brother. His ma an' pa are dead. They's jest me an' him left in the family."

Pausing, the speaker then regarded us intently for a moment or two. He seemed to be studying us. He realized, of course, that we were treasure hunting on our own hook. We hadn't admitted it; but

he knew! And being in the game, too, I could imagine that he was sort of figuring how he could draw us out without saying too much himself.

"Now, if me an' Tommy was desperate characters," he went on steadily, "we could easy enough rope you up an' keep you here, seein' as how you're workin' ag'in' us. We probably could make you tell things, too, to our interests. But, frankly, we hain't people of that sort. Tommy, of course, is kind of hot-headed, as you jest saw. But that hain't nothin' ag'in' him to speak of. I used to be hot-headed myself when I was his age. An' even to-day if I'm woke up sudden I start pitchin' things. The other mornin' I pitched a fryin' pan. Jest missed Tommy's head, too. So that is why he woke me up to-night with the talkin' machine. The one big p'int is, as I see it, air we goin' to turn you loose, to further work ag'in' us, or, in fairness to us, would you first like to hear our story to sort of decide in your own minds whether or not it might not be best for you to work with us?"

Poppy's face was curious.

"Why do you put it that way?" says he guardedly. "Do you *want* us to work with you?"

"No!" the kid shoved in.

"Shet up, you!"

"Aw, heck! Throw the big simp out."

But Poppy only grinned.

"Did you ever hear of a man by the name of Nathan Weir?" he then inquired, thinking, I guess, that here was a good chance to find out something about Mr. Weckler's missing daughter.

The old man seemed suddenly saddened by the question.

"Nathan an' me was brothers," says he in a lower voice. "Tommy is his son."

"What?" cried Poppy, staring. Then he shot a glance at me.

"Tommy had a good ma," the old man went on. "But his pa, if I must say so as an own brother, was a bad one. So it's jest as well, I s'pose, everything considered, that he's dead. Fur them kind of people only make the world unhappier."

Poppy turned curiously to the kid.

"Did you know," says he, "that your grandfather lives in Tutter?"

"Huh!" came the scowl. "I'm not interested in *him*."

"He's a nice old man."

"That's what *you* say."

"Have you ever seen him?"

"No, nor I don't ever care to."

"Why do you hate him?" says Poppy curiously.

"Why shouldn't I hate him," the kid's eyes blazed, "after the way he turned down my mother."

"He never knew what became of your mother."

"Like time he didn't! She wrote to him when she was down and out, asking him to take me. And he never as much as answered her letter. So, do you think I'm going to chase after him now? I guess not! I wouldn't have come this close to him if it hadn't been for the hidden treasure."

Poppy then told how the grandfather had been hit on the head.

"A one-armed burglar," spoke up the old man, sort of reflective-like. "It ought to be easy to spot him."

"Have you ever seen a one-armed man hanging around here?"

"No, nor a two-armed man, nuther."

"And you never suspected that you were being secretly watched?"

"Only what Tommy told me about seein somethin' near the tunnel. But he wasn't sure whether it was a man or not."

"I have a hunch," waggled Poppy, "that the cat killer, as we call him, for want of a better name, has been keeping closer tab on you than either of you suspect. And the object, of course, was to let you lift the treasure and then grab it on you."

"But who can it be?" puzzled the old man.

"If it's some one who has followed you here," says Poppy, "you ought to be able to answer that a whole lot better than us."

"Tommy," the old man turned to his nephew, "kin you remember any one-armed men 'round Rimtown?"

"No," the kid slowly shook his head.

"Um . . . This cat killer, evidently, is a bad egg. An' as they's safety in numbers, I'm more convinced than ever that the four of us ought to be workin' together. Besides, we prob'ly kin do quicker work if we put together what *we* know an' what *you* know. Bein' relations, me an' Tommy, of course, has first claim on the gold. You kain't git around that. An' if you were to git it ahead of us we prob'ly could go to law an' take it away from you. I'm not sayin' that, however, to force you to j'ine us. You kin do whatever you think is best. But it would be an awful unlucky day fur both parties, I'm here to tell you, if we was to monkey along separately, each sort of buckin' the other, an' let the cat killer lift the treasure ahead of us. So, if you'll j'ine us we'll agree to go fifty-fifty with you, me an' Tommy gittin' half an' you fellers the other half."

"But we've already promised to share the treasure with Mrs. O'Mally," says Poppy.

"The old lady in the stone house?"

"Yes."

"Um . . . After the scare we've given her with our 'ghost' noises she's entitled to a share of the

treasure, I guess. Anyway, she holds a deed to the land. That's somethin' in her favor. So, if you're willin', we'll split the treasure five ways. Yes or no?"

Poppy looked at me.

"I'm willing, Jerry."

"Here, too," says I.

"Very well," nodded the pleased old man. "But to make it a good bargain I guess you'd better go over there an' shake hands with Tommy. I see he's bin sittin' there chawin' his finger nails, which is a purty good sign that he's sorry fur havin' let his temper git away from him. An' if you'll give him a chance to show his real nature I think you'll find that he's a purty nice boy."

As the old man had said, the kid didn't look so mad now. Still, it kind of surprised me when he shoved out his mitt to us. And what a firm, warm mitt it was! Here was a kid, I told myself, whose friendship was worth prizing.

"Well, Tommy," the old man grinned at his nephew, who now sat between us on the bed, "who's goin' to do the talkin', me or you?"

"You go ahead, Uncle Abner."

A chair was brought forward.

"I don't know how much you boys know about this rascally uncle of mine who put away the treasure on the other side of the river," the story was

begun, "but if all accounts of him is true I tremble to think of what become of his wicked soul when he died. His thievery, though, as it was told to me, was a slim business fur the most part, as he hadn't much chance to get his hands on anything big. One day, though, the story got out that a St. Louis packet was comin' up the river with a shipment of gold. Well, old Peg-leg, as I'll call him, seein' as how that's what everybody else called him, was determined to make the one big haul of his wicked career. An', as we know, he did it. They was murder on the river that terrible night. An' the gold that was later put away has on it the taint of human blood. A few weeks later, in early winter, old Peg-leg was shot. An' when he was dyin' he give my father, who was then a boy in knee pants, a gold cucumber about as long as my thumb. 'It's the key,' says he. 'Keep it. An' whatever you find is yours.' Then the posse broke in an' my father had to git out of sight into the tunnel or he, too, young as he was, would 'a' bin lugged off to jail an' mebbe hung. Skippin' the country, he went to Ohio, settlin' near Rimtown, an' so 'fraid was he of the Illinois law that he never dared to go back.

"This, of course, happened many years ago. An' havin' bin born an' brought up in another state I never knew that they was sech a man as old Peg-leg

Weir until my brother Nathan picked up the story from a distant relative. He come here then, Nathan did, to see what he could find, though he hadn't bin told about the gold cucumber, as none of us knew about that until our father's death. What Nathan brought home, a year later, wasn't a chest of gold but a wife. Jest a young girl. Then, several years later, Tommy was born. As he grew up he was a great pet of his grandpa's, an' we used to wonder what the old man meant when he kept sayin', 'Some day, Tommy, Grandpa's goin' to make you rich.' We was dirt poor. An', fur one, I couldn't figure out where these sudden riches was comin' from. Then, on the tenth of last May," the voice dropped, "we was left entirely alone, me an' Tommy, but not until we had bin told the story of the gold cucumber. It was given to Tommy on his grandpa's deathbed, an' we was told about the tunnel an' the secret door in the chimney. So, naturally, as soon as we could straighten up our affairs we set out fur Illinois, each with a pack on his back, an' here we be with all of our belongings, which hain't much. Of course, in startin' out we hadn't any idear of endin' up in a cave like this. Havin' bin led to believe that the old house was deserted, we expected to use it temporarily. But on findin' it occupied we did the next best thing. An', to that p'int, we've bin comfortable here, though sometimes the spiders an'

skeeters git after us. Makin' free use of a boat that we found tied in the creek, we first went back an' forth across the river in the dark. It wasn't any trick fur us to find the tunnel an' later on the secret passage leadin' to the underground cellar. But however much we sounded the stone walls in the underground room we could find no hollow places, as seemed natural to expect. Lately I've quit goin' over. Fur it seemed useless to me. But Tommy he hung on. He even took to goin' over in broad daylight. But still, after a month's work, we're right where we started in. So, however good our claim is to the treasure, we'll be mighty glad to share it with you, as I say, if you kin help us find it. Fur we've had no luck ourselves."

Poppy and I were dead sure, of course, as we enthusiastically told the old man, that the treasure would soon be separated from its hiding place. And now that we were all working together, including Mrs. O'Mally, why not abandon the cave, we suggested. There was plenty of room for all of us in the big stone house. And the others would be a lot safer over there than here. So the cave stuff was quickly gathered up. And then, as we were leaving, the old man, now dressed, got down on his knees to dig his money box out of a hole in the floor.

"We hid it," he explained, "not so much because

of the hundred dollars that we've got in it as on account of the gold cucumber. Wait jest a minute an' I'll show it to you. Mebbe you kin better figure out its secret than us."

There was a startled cry.

"It's gone!"

Poppy and I saw in a flash what had happened. Secretly watching the cave, as the leader had said, the cat killer had stolen the gold cucumber, only to lose it later on in Mr. Weckler's flower bed.

"I—I guess, boys," the old man got up, white-faced, "that we're done fur now."

Poppy laughed.

"Don't you ever think so, Mr. Weir. For it so happens that Jerry and I have been claiming ownership to your gold cucumber for the past twenty-four hours." Hurriedly he told how the cucumber had fallen into our hands. "You can see," he concluded, "why we connected the cat killer with the treasure. For that same morning we found out that the pirate not only had raised cucumbers as a hobby, but had made a queer cucumber mold."

The old man's eyes were full of admiration.

"Smart!" he waggled. "Smart as a whip!"

Ten minutes later our two loaded boats were afloat on the river. And as I looked back at the shore, with the talking machine in my lap, I fancied that I could trace the outline of a creeping black

shape. But I wasn't scared. For there were four of us now.

Oh, baby! The fun we were going to have! We were poor now. But in a day or two we probably would be as rich as Henry Ford.

CHAPTER XVIII

POPPY'S PEDIGREED PICKLES

LANDING on the north shore of the river, the boats were dragged out of the water, to keep them from wandering off into the current, after which we jiggled the cave truck into four equal loads and started single file for the darkened stone house, where we did a snappy little rat-a-tat-tat on the closed front door.

"Who is it?" Mrs. O'Mally's quavering voice percolated through the keyhole.

Getting our answer, the door was quickly thrown open.

"We've brought you company," laughed Poppy, as the whole gang traipsed in.

The woman stared at the visitors, more particularly at the stooped old man.

"Howdy, ma'am," says he, taking off his hat and bowing like a hand-organ monkey. Then his bundle got away from him and tin pans galloped all over the room.

"Mither of Moses!" hurdled Mrs. O'Mally.

" 'Tis a wonder ye wouldn't scare the wits out of a body."

We told her then who the old man was, and why the kid was no longer a prisoner.

"As we're all working together," Poppy wound up, "we figured that the safest and best plan, with the cat killer in mind, was to live together, too."

"Sure, 'tis welcome ye are to what I've got," came heartily from the generous woman. "An' 'tis glad I am, too, for your company. For with secret doors in me cellar an' a vicious prowler without, 'tis no safe place for a lonely ould widdy. Look at me! 'Tis still tremblin' I be from the fright that gripped me when I heard ye on the front porch. For, thinks I, 'tis no one but that creepin' cat killer, himself—bad luck to his murderin' soul!"

"Has he been here again, Mrs. O'Mally?"

"Niver a sound have I heard from him since ye left. But 'tis the constant feelin' I've had that there's *eyes*."

I knew what she meant. For it was those same hidden *eyes* that had put the shivers in me on the way to the bridge.

Having been up all night, Poppy and I were dead tired, as you can imagine. But dizzy as I was from lack of sleep, I had no intention of turning in until I had seen the underground chamber. So, leaving

Mrs. O'Mally and Uncle Abner to frisk the extra beds into shape, the leader and I, with our new chum, skinned down the cellar stairs. Then, having opened the secret door—and I might explain here that the only reason why the door had escaped us in the first place was because the chimney base was built squarely in the middle of the cellar floor—we next corkscrewed down the winding stairs. As Poppy had said, it was like going down a peculiar well. Coming to the room where Tom had gotten the "bump on the bean," as he now grinningly expressed it, I zigzagged here and there, hoping to feast my eyes on some of that wonderful "pirate" truck that we had talked of. But the only "weapons" in sight were Tom's pick and an old mule collar. Nor were there any skeletons.

"What makes you so sure," says Poppy, when we had made the rounds, "that the treasure is walled up in this room?"

"That's what Grandpa Weir told us."

"Did he see it put away?"

"No. But he said we'd find it here."

Poppy swung the pick.

"Solid rock," says he.

We were then taken through another secret passage which connected the hidden room with the old cement tunnel. Here we found a second iron door, the complexion of which was so much like the solid

rock on either side of it that it had completely escaped us. But, to that point, even if we had been wise to the fact that it was there I doubt if we could have spotted it.

"Who do you suppose built all these passages," puzzled Poppy. "The old pirate, himself?"

"If he did," I put in, "he must have been some worker."

"Grandpa Weir didn't tell us all the particulars," says Tom. "But it's Uncle Abner's opinion that the early miners, whoever they were, tapped the cellar of the stone house by accident. They couldn't have been skilled miners, Uncle Abner says, for a shaft is never properly made from the bottom up. Later the fake chimney base, with its secret door, was built over the hole in the cellar floor. And as this all favored my great-uncle's crooked scheme, it may be that the queer mining was done under his orders."

At four o'clock we hit the hay, Poppy and I sharing one bed and Tom and his uncle the other. But before turning in we double-locked the cellar door, further rigging up a "tin-pan" burglar alarm. But nothing woke us up.

Mrs. O'Mally, as usual, had to pile out early to start her pickers to work, but she moved quietly in and out of the house, so the rest of us didn't uncover our eyes until ten o'clock.

"Well," says I, yawning, "what's the program for to-day?"

"Cucumbers," says Poppy, reaching for his pants.

"Gold?" I further exercised my jaws, as I thought of our recent adventures.

"Gold and pickles, both."

I suddenly sat up.

"*Good* night! With so much other truck going on I'd completely forgotten about that bin of cucumbers. What are we going to do with them?"

"We've either got to pickle them," says Poppy, "or sell them to old Pennykorn at a loss of a dollar and ten cents a bushel."

I put my adding machine to work.

"That's almost eight hundred dollars."

"If the treasure turns out as well as we hope," says he, "the loss of eight hundred dollars might not cripple us. But just the same I'd go ten miles out of my way before I'd lose even a penny to that grasping old geezer."

"But, Poppy," says I, getting a slant on his thoughts, "how in the world are *we* going to pickle seven hundred bushels of cucumbers? For even if we had plenty of money to work with, we wouldn't know how to go about it."

"We might hire old Butch," he grinned, flipping his necktie into shape.

"Yes," says I, matching his nonsense with some of my own, "and we might commit suicide, too. But who wants to do that when fried cakes are only ten cents a yard?"

"Jerry, after eating those swell cucumber pickles at his house—and I *know* they're the same kind of pickles that I bought at the food sale—it'll forever be a puzzle to me how he slopped over on the last batch."

"I hope," says I uneasily, "that you aren't thinking of giving him a second trial."

"Hardly." Then he swatted me with a pillow. "Get up, you lazy bum. Here I am all dressed and you haven't even untangled yourself from the feather tick."

"Wait a minute," I motioned him away. "I've got an idea."

"Spill it."

"How would it be," I suggested thoughtfully, "if we got Mrs. O'Mally to do the pickle making for us? Mother was raving about her pickles last night. So they must be all right."

"By George!" came the applause. "I wonder if we can't? Of course," he added, with less enthusiasm, "they won't be the *wonder* pickles. We can't expect that. But other dealers sell big wads of ordinary pickles. So, with fairly good luck, we ought to be able to flag an order now and then."

"Shall we call her in and ask her?" says I eagerly, feeling pretty hefty over the fact that little Y. T. (meaning Yours Truly) had made the important suggestion. Oh, I'm there, all right . . . once or twice a year, at least!

"Just a minute," says Poppy. Then, having slipped out of the room, I heard him stumble over a chair in the empty kitchen. By hurrying, I was well ornamented with clothes by the time he got back. "Before saying anything to her," he laughed, "I thought we'd better sample her pickles on the sly. For it's a cinch we don't want to make another crazy blunder." Then he shoved a cucumber at me. "Try it," says he, cheerfully, "and see what you think of it."

I loved that pickle about as much as you love cod-liver oil.

"Oof!" I screwed up my nose. "Do I have to do it?"

"Here we go," says Poppy, heroically. "One, two, *three*."

At the third count I jabbed the hated pickle into my mouth and began to chew. Then, as I got a taste, I sort of stiffened with surprise, after which I chewed all the faster, my jaws and eyes working together.

"What the dickens? . . ." cried Poppy, staring at me.

"It tastes to me like those church pickles," says I, staring back at him.

He was out of the room like a shot. And this time, instead of grabbing a pickle apiece, he heaved up the stairs to our boudoir with a whole dishful.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" he cried, when the bottom of the dish was uncovered. "I can't understand it. But if these aren't a match for the church pickles and the ones I ate in old Butch's house, I'll eat my shirt."

I remembered then what the mule driver had dished out to us about his choice recipe.

"Don't you catch on?" I cried, as my beezer slipped into high gear. "It was from Mrs. O'Mally that old Butch got his recipe in the first place."

Poppy looked dizzy.

"Were we ever dumb," says he, "not to have suspected it? And *him* going with her, too! Drill a hole in my thick skull, Jerry: my brains need ventilating."

In answer to our questions, Mrs. O'Mally admitted to us at the breakfast table that she had sent some of her pickles to the food sale. She also had given several jars, she said, to "a friend." We knew, of course, who the "friend" was! Feeling that she was too poor to subscribe to the Tutter newspaper, she thus had missed seeing our ad.

Starting in at the beginning, we handed her the

whole story, which amused her one minute and amazed her the next. But when we asked her, in the wind-up, to do the pickle-making stunt for us, she almost fainted.

"*Me* pickle seven hundred bushels of cucumbers? Mither of Moses! Is it the work of ten women that ye think I can do?"

"All right," Poppy quickly followed up. "We'll go at it that way, then. You'll be the boss. See? And the other women will do the work."

"No, no!"

"But, Mrs. O'Mally," old do-or-die hung on, "if you don't help us, we won't be able to pay you for the cucumbers. Besides, think of what it will mean to you if the pickles turn out to be a big success. We'll be able to start up a pickle factory. That will make you rich. For, of course, you'll be one of the owners."

"Sure," came dizzily, " 'tis nothin' I hear but talk of riches. First it was the pirate's treasure; an' now it's pickles."

"Besides," Poppy galloped along, "think how lovely it will be to beat old Pennykorn at his own game, who probably is waiting for you right now with that ninety-cent contract."

The pickle woman's face hardened.

"He'll get no ninety-cent cucumbers from me."

"That's the spirit, Mrs. O'Mally. We've got to

fight him. It's our duty, sort of. For if we can work this pickle scheme, independent of him, the sweet-corn farmers can then get together, in pattern of us, and beat him at that game, too. It will mean thousands of dollars to them. And instead of mortgaging their farms to buy shoes and stockings, they'll be able to ride around in Chevrolets."

Mrs. O'Malley liked the idea of the Chevrolets.

"But what women have ye in mind?" she let down the bars.

"Jerry's ma will help, for one."

"Sure thing," I swung in. "And she probably can get some of the Methodist ladies, too."

Poppy almost jumped over the table.

"Hot dog!" he yipped. "Now I know! There isn't a church in town that isn't head over heels in debt. All these bazaars that are put on by the different church societies, and the chicken-pie suppers, is just an endless run of schemes to raise money. All right! If the church ladies want to raise money, we'll put them to work. We furnish everything and they get ten per cent of what the pickles sell for. Why, kid," he yipped it off, from the peak of his enthusiasm, "they'll jump at a scheme like that. Sure thing. And if we find out that we have more cucumbers than the Methodist ladies can handle, we'll give the Presbyterian ladies a chance to lift their church debt. If that isn't enough, we'll call

in the Catholic ladies. For pickles are pickles, kid, regardless of whether they're Protestant pickles or Catholic pickles."

Mrs. O'Mally got the idea from this talk that the church ladies were going to run things to suit themselves.

"Sure," she heaved a sigh of relief, " 'tis glad I am to learn that ye hain't a-goin' to need me."

"Don't you think for one minute that we aren't going to need you," Poppy still held the floor. "In fact," he grinned, "you're going to be the biggest frog in the puddle. For everything that the women do will be done under your directions. The point is, Mrs. O'Mally, that we've got to turn out better than average pickles if we're going to put this scheme across with a bang. You know how to do it. And you'll want to be on the job every minute, to make sure that every part of the work is being done exactly as you would do it if you were working alone."

Leaving Tom and his uncle at work in the underground room, with the promise that we'd give them a helping hand as soon as we got our pickle business better organized, Poppy and I lit out for town, where we had an important talk with Mr. Thomas Lorring, our former "stilt" partner, in the latter's private office in the Commercial Bank.

"What?" the president boomed at us in pretended amazement, thinking, no doubt, of how we had sim-

ilarly called upon him for help in starting up our stilt factory. "Are you young shavers trying to organize another new industry?"

"A pickle factory," grinned Poppy, who had a hunch that he stacked up pretty high in the kindly banker's estimation.

"And you want to borrow money, heh?"

"All we can get."

"Meaning how much?"

"Five hundred dollars to start with."

"Humph! Think you're going to get it?"

"We've got to," says Poppy earnestly. "For if we don't our cucumbers will go to waste."

"Not necessarily. Mrs. O'Mally can still sell them to the canning company."

It began to look as though we were going to get turned down. And I could see that Poppy was worried.

"But they're trying to cheat her, Mr. Lorring," he burst out. "That's one reason why we stepped in. All they agree to pay her is ninety cents a bushel."

The banker held up a big red hand.

"Wait a minute," says he, sort of quiet-like. "A thing you want to learn, Poppy, if you're going to be a good business man, is not to go around telling people that your competitor is a cheat. As a matter of fact, Mr. Pennykorn isn't a cheat. He's just close-

fisted in his business dealings, that's all. He isn't forcing any of the farmers to sell their stuff to him. And the mere fact that his prices are low doesn't stamp his dealings as being crooked. I will say, however, in justice to your viewpoint, that his way of doing business isn't right according to my notion. And if we could clear up the situation for the local farmers by starting another canning factory, I'd be in favor of it. However, with all due respect to your other manufacturing success, the organization of such a factory isn't a job for two boys."

"But, Mr. Lorring—"

"Just a minute," the big hand came up again. "The point that I am going to make is this: You can't borrow money here with the specific idea of starting up a pickle factory. However, having confidence in you, because of past associations, I'm willing to advance you five hundred dollars on a thirty-day note at six per cent, to enable you to swing this pickle deal and thus save yourself from loss. If you find in selling your pickles that you have what would seem to be the nucleus of another industry, that will be taken up separately, by the proper people. Just give this slip to the cashier as you go out and your account will be credited accordingly.

"Five hundred and thirty-two dollars," says Poppy, looking at our new bank balance when we were in the street. "It isn't going to be a cent too

much. Do you know what seven hundred bushels of pickled cucumbers ought to bring?"

"How much?" says I.

"Anywhere from seven thousand to eight thousand dollars."

This high finance, or whatever you call it, was almost too much for me.

"Poppy," says I, sort of anxious-like, "aren't we getting in gosh-awful deep?"

"The deeper the better," says he. "For then we can high-dive in perfect safety."

"We may 'high-dive,' " says I, "and never come up."

But he was too bubbly inside to be troubled by me.

"Now," says he, starting off down the street, "let's see what the Ladies' Aid has got to say."

"By the way," says I, keeping pace with him, "are we still going to use that 'Aunt Jemima' name?"

"No," he shook his head. " 'Aunt Jemima' took too hard a flop ever to get her wind back. So far as we are concerned the old lady is dead and buried."

" 'Poppy's Pickles,' " I showed my stuff. "That's a good name."

"Jerry, did you ever hear of pedigreed cows?"

"Sure thing."

"Isn't it a fact that *pedigreed* is the mark of

quality in cows, horses, dogs and almost everything else?"

"Even nanny goats," I nodded.

"All right," says he, "we're going to manufacture pedigreed pickles. Or, if you think it'll help to stretch the name out, we'll call them 'Poppy's Pedigreed Pickles.' That's what they are—pickles with a pedigree. For you heard what Mrs. O'Mally said about her recipe having been handed down in the family for a hundred years or more. There's where the *pedigreed* part comes in. It's a *proven* recipe, in other words. The quality of the pickles is guaranteed. Do you like the name, Jerry?"

I beamed at him.

"Do I like it? Kid, I'm crazy over it." Then, running off into my usual line of bunk, I got in some big gestures. "What a difference one day makes in the history of the world," I orationed. "Yesterday pickles were pickles. But to-day pickles aren't pickles unless they're Pedigreed Pickles . . . Let's send a telegram to Mr. Heinz, telling him that we're in the pickle business, too," I wound up. "Maybe he'll be so scared that he'll beg us to buy him out at two cents on the dollar."

Putting all nonsense aside, though, I saw that old Poppy had a real idea. The job now was to make it work.

CHAPTER XIX

DARK DAYS

Two—three days passed. And were Poppy and I ever the busy little bees! Oh, boy! We were here, there and everywhere, with the president of the Ladies' Aid pulling our coat tails one minute for more cucumbers and the kid from the Western Union office zigzagging after us the next with a peck of reply telegrams from keg foundries, bottle factories, and I don't know what all. There were trips to the printing shop, too, where we were having labels printed, small ones for bottles and big ones, printed in red and green, for the ten-gallon kegs that were being zipped to us by fast freight. Between jobs Poppy squeezed out a business letter, which later on was run off in quantities at the printing office and then mailed to wholesale grocers all over the state.

Poppy's Pedigreed Pickles! With so much lively pickle making going on in town, which, of course, created wide talk, and with so much mail going out of town, it seemd to me that everybody within a radius of a thousand miles ought to know about our

wonderful new pickles. I felt pretty big, let me tell you. For here we were with twenty women working for us. And us nothing but boys! It was a feather in our cap, all right. I was crazy, too, to get the kegs filled, so that we could do the shipping act. For then, of course, the money would come rolling in. Merrily we roll along, roll along, roll along! The little old jack couldn't roll in any too fast to suit me. How wonderful it was to be rich!

During these helter-skelter days there were moments when I stopped, winded, to sort of stare at Poppy in appreciative wonderment. That kid! No matter what came up he always seemed to know just what to do and how to do it. It was his earnest lingo in the first place that had won Mother over to our scheme, and through her the other members of the Ladies' Aid. If we took in a total of eight thousand dollars, he said, in presenting the proposition to them, that would mean eight hundred dollars for the church. So, finding that the Commercial Bank was backing us, which proved that our scheme wasn't just a crazy kid notion, there was a general call throughout the Methodist circles for workers, and by the time our first wagonload of cucumbers was delivered at the church kitchen twenty women were there to do the receiving act.

As Mrs. O'Mally was now kept busy at the

ONE OLD LADY WAS HORRIFIED THINKING THEY WERE BEER KEGS.

church from eight in the morning till five in the afternoon, Uncle Abner took charge of the picking. And, boy, oh, boy, did the cucumbers ever roll in! Bushels and bushels and bushels of them! As I have explained, they first had to be soaked in salt water for two days, and at one time Poppy and I counted two hundred and fifteen borrowed tubs in the church basement, every one of which was filled to the brim. It began to look as though the workers would have to start parking filled tubs upstairs in front of the pulpit. Then the kegs arrived, in the nick of time, and as fast as they were filled we piled them outside at the curb. One old lady in passing was horrified by the thought that they were beer kegs. Can you imagine! Later the filled kegs were trucked to a barn near Poppy's place, which we called our "warehouse."

We also opened our store, putting Tom in charge. His first job was to get rid of the other junk on the shelves, after which the glass jars were washed clean and filled with new pickles.

In starting out in the pickle business our original plan had been to sell only in Tutter. But now, with such a tremendous wad of pickles on our hands, and more coming, we realized that we had to reach out for a wider market. And that is why Poppy had written to the Illinois wholesalers.

Over four hundred dollars of our money had been

paid out. And every mail brought us a bill for something or other. But to our great disappointment the orders that we had expected didn't come in. Even worse, the one order that Poppy had gotten in Rockford was canceled.

What was wrong? Was the Pennykorn gang bucking us with some secret influence that we didn't know about? Poppy got his Rockford cousin on the telephone, thus learning that the canning company had written to all of their dealers, warning them against our pickles. Later Henny sent us the letter. Here it is:

Wiggins & Wakefield,
Rockford, Ill.

Gentlemen:

It is our duty, we feel, to inform you that a somewhat absurd attempt has been made in Tutter, by two inexperienced boys, to start up a rival pickle concern.

You, of course, can imagine what kind of "pickles" two boys would make! To us, though, it is not a humorous situation, for we feel, owing to their use of the "Tutter" name, that you and other dealers, whose good will we value highly, might confuse the new product with ours.

Enclosed is a newspaper clipping, secured

through the courtesy of the Chicago Daily Tribune, which pertains to a recent local epidemic of ptomaine poisoning. We are unwilling, of course, to state openly that the so-called "pedigreed pickles" now being canned by these misguided boys were responsible for the community poisoning. However, as the boys scattered samples of their "pickles" throughout town on the same day the poisoning developed, you can draw your own conclusion.

At your service as always,
The Tutter Canning Company,
Foreman Pennykorn, President.

You can see how unfair the letter was. It made out that our pickles had poisoned the people, which wasn't so. From start to finish it was nothing but a sort of lie.

"Poppy," says I, "I guess we're done for."

But while the leader was worried, as his face showed, he had no thought of giving up.

"It could be worse, Jerry."

"Pickles and debts," I further sweat. "They're going to smother us."

"How many kegs have we in stock?"

"One hundred and twenty."

"That's twelve hundred gallons. They're easily worth one-fifty a gallon. So that gives us eighteen hundred dollars in quick assets."

"We aren't talking about assets," says I. "We're talking about pickles."

"Pickles are assets in this case. The point is, Jerry, that we have a stock of pickles worth eighteen hundred dollars. Our debts are around five hundred dollars. So we aren't in such terribly bad shape as you imagine. If necessary, we'll carry samples of our pickles direct to the retail trade, so that the grocers will see exactly what they're buying. It will take longer to sell our stock that way. But I think we can do it. And later on—"

"What then?" says I, when he paused, with a sort of hard look on his face.

"It's a long lane, Jerry," says he, thinking of the crooked Pennykorn bunch, "that hasn't a turn."

I wasn't so perked up by this encouraging talk as you might imagine. And when Poppy filled a a suit case with samples and went away that afternoon on a selling trip, I felt like a deserted sailor on a sinking ship. I knew now why an old dog, in dying, always tried to crawl off into some dark corner. Death being a sort of disgrace, it wanted to get out of its master's sight. So did I! And to think that only a few hours ago I had patted myself on the back. Oh, gee! If we never had gotten into this awful mess. How crazy we had been to think that we could buck a hundred-thousand-dollar corporation.

Tom, as I say, was running the store, which, with steadily increasing business, was picking up several dollars a day. And out in the country Uncle Abner was still bossing the pickers, who seemingly were working harder than ever. The Methodist ladies, I noticed, were beginning to lose their enthusiasm. Then, to completely knock the props out from under me, a strange farmer pulled up to the church with a huge wagonload of cucumbers. He was glad to know that we were paying two dollars a bushel, he sort of beamed at me. And he had decided to let us have his entire crop, of which two more wagonloads were now on the way to town.

"No!" I cried, getting my voice. "Take them over to the canning factory. We don't want them."

"Look here, young feller," he began to bristle, "you kain't go back on your word that way."

"What?" I squeaked, going cold. "Did Poppy order cucumbers from *you*, too?"

"When I was comin' by Miz O'Mally's farm I stopped in, to git a peek at her patch. An' your man out thar—the one with the whiskers—said if I'd bring my cucumbers here, an' stand by you in your scheme of buckin' the cannin' company, you'd pay me two dollars a bushel. So here they be."

I started to argue with him. I tried to tell him that Uncle Abner had no right to buy the cucumbers. As it was, I said, we had a hundred times

more cucumbers than we could use. But I might just as well have shoved my gab at a brick wall. He unloaded the cucumbers right there in front of my eyes. A pile as high as my head! No wonder a sweating pickle maker fainted dead away when she groped her way out of the kitchen for a breath of fresh air and saw what was ahead of her.

I don't know what I told the farmer. He declared afterwards that I said we'd pay him at the end of the week. Anyway, he drove off. And there I was! Nor could I wire Poppy to come home and help me. For I didn't know whether he was in Joliet or Peoria, though, to that point, I expected a letter from him in the afternoon mail which undoubtedly would contain his address.

Down the street two more cucumber wagons had come into sight, and hearing a buzz of excited voices in the church basement, as the recovering fainter began talking, I decided that the best thing for me to do was to dig out.

"Say, Jerry," Tom told me, when I dragged myself wearily into the Pickle Parlor, "Mr. Pennykorn wants to see you."

"What?" I stared in amazement.

"He stopped in here a few minutes ago. Talked as nice as pie, too. So you better run over and find out what he's got up his sleeve."

"Yah," I sweat, "and get my beezer knocked off.

Bu-lieve me, I know that old bird, all right."

"Shucks! He wouldn't dare to lay a finger on you even if he wanted to. You ought to know that."

The last time I had talked with Mr. Pennykorn his eyes had blazed with hatred. But now, on meeting him in his office, he purred over me like an old pussy cat.

"I suppose," says he, when I was seated, "that you're wondering why I sent for you."

I nodded. I guess I was pretty stiff about it, too. For I couldn't forget about that crooked letter.

"The—ah—point is," he got down to business, "we have a market for cucumber pickles, but no new stock, largely due, of course, to your interference. On the other hand, as I understand the situation, you have a sizable stock but no market. So it would seem to me, putting aside all past differences that the thing for us to do is to get together in a friendly way. And here is my proposition: We will take over your entire pickle stock, assume all your debts, reimburse you for the money that you have paid out of your own pockets, absorb all your ordered raw stock, and, in addition, as an indication of our good faith, write a personal check for you in the amount of two hundred dollars—this, of course, in the event that the plan meets with your approval."

Oh, boy, what a relief! Now we could get out from under, as the saying is, without losing a penny. Better, still, we'd be two hundred dollars to the good. Crooked as he had been with us, I was willing to forgive him.

"I'll have to get Poppy on long distance," says I, when he brought out a contract for me to sign.

"Not necessarily," says he in that nice pussy-cat way.

"But we're partners."

"Your separate signature is binding."

I shook my head.

"I don't want to sign," I held off, "unless Poppy knows about it."

"This is a very generous offer, everything considered," says he in a peculiarly steady voice. His eyes, too, were peculiar. Sort of deep and dangerous-like. "For your own good," he added, "I would urge its immediate acceptance."

I got up.

"No," I further shook my head, backing toward the door. "I won't sign the paper unless Poppy says so. I'll try and locate him right away. I—I think it will be all right, Mr. Pennykorn. I want to sign it. And I think he'll tell me to go ahead. Just as soon as I get word from him I'll let you know."

As I was going out I met young smarty.

"Had to come to time, huh?" he sneered.

I didn't say anything. But I was glad all of a sudden, as I shot a black look at him, that I hadn't signed the paper. However, that feeling was short lived. For I realized what would happen to us if we didn't sign. They weren't through with us. Mr. Pennykorn's actions had said so as plain as words. He was giving us a last chance. And, bu-lieve me, I wasn't going to let that chance get away from me.

Telling Tom what was in the wind, I lit out for the post office. But the expected letter wasn't there. However, a telegram was handed to me shortly before four o'clock.

> Sold ten gallons to Chicago grocer. Will be home to-night at eight-thirty with order.
>
> Poppy.

Ten gallons! *Some* order. I was surprised that Poppy had mentioned it in the telegram. Maybe, though, I figured out, this was just his way of breaking the news to me that his selling trip had been a fizzle.

I got Mr. Pennykorn on the telephone. And it was arranged that I was to meet Poppy at the train and take him directly to the bank, where the contract was to be signed.

CHAPTER XX

POPPY SPRINGS A SURPRISE

STARTING down the street, after having telephoned to Mr. Pennykorn from the Western Union office, as I have written down in the conclusion of the preceding chapter, I was overtaken by a kid who had a note for me from the president of the Ladies' Aid. I was to come over to the church right away, the note said, as the "committee" wanted to talk with me on important business.

What I did, instead of obeying the note, was to sneak up an alley and hide in Mr. Weckler's apple orchard. Any old time you'd catch me going over to the church to "talk business" with that bunch of buzzing women. They were up on their ear, of course, over the farmer's cucumbers, of which the other two loads were probably piled in front of the door. And what they wanted to do was to jump on my neck. Gosh all Friday! I had tried to head the farmer off. But he wouldn't listen to me. So it wasn't my fault.

Mr. Pennykorn could talk to them a whole lot better than I could. Or better than Poppy, either,

for that matter. For he was a business man. So the thing for me to do, I wisely decided, was to keep out of sight until the paper had been signed. That would make the banker responsible. Paying them off, as he had agreed to do, the mountain of cucumbers would then be hauled over to the canning factory and everything would be lovely. Mrs. O'Mally would get her money, too. As for the farmer, I should worry about him. My hope was that I'd never see him again.

Mrs. Clayton caught sight of me from the back porch.

"Why, Jerry Todd!" says she in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

"Hiding," I pushed out a sickly grin.

"Hiding?" she repeated, searching my face. "Are you in trouble?"

I told her then about the mess that we had made of our pickle business.

"You poor boy," she laughed. "You certainly are in hot water."

"How is Mr. Weckler?" I inquired, when she had invited me into the house.

"Getting along very nicely. His mind is still somewhat clouded, but we all feel joyful in the knowledge that it will completely clear up in time."

"Has he told you yet who hit him?"

"No," she shook her head.

"We think we've got the guy spotted, Mrs. Clayton."

"Yes?"

"He's hiding in the 'Weir jungle' near the river. And if we once wind up this crazy pickle mess we'll probably go in after him."

"But hadn't you ought to let the law do that?" says she, with a worried look.

"We have a special reason for wanting to do it ourselves," I told her, thinking, of course, of the still hidden treasure and the help that the peculiarly informed man probably could be to us in its recovery.

"I don't think you and Poppy ought to attempt it alone."

"Oh," I let the cat out of the bag, "there's four of us now."

"*Four* of you?" she repeated the number, looking at me curiously.

I almost had to tell her then who the other two were. And why not? Tom hadn't said that we were to keep his identity a secret.

"Did you know, Mrs. Clayton," I began, "that Mr. Weckler has a grandson?"

She stared.

"A *grandson?*" Then she searched my face to see if I were in earnest. "Why, Jerry, you must be mistaken. For if Mr. Weckler has a grandson he

surely would have mentioned it to me. I've been here for years."

"We told Tom that his grandpa didn't know about him," I waggled. "But he flew up, hot-tempered. According to the story he tells, his mother wrote home for help, when she was down and out, and the letter never was answered. So, in a way, you can't blame the kid for being sore. I'd feel the same way, I guess, if it had been my mother."

"Jerry!" came the further cry. "Are you talking about Mr. Weckler's daughter?"

I nodded.

"Wouldn't it be bully," says I, "if we could bring Tom and his grandpa together. For the kid needs a home. And Mr. Weckler probably would be glad to have him here."

Getting the whole story, Mrs. Clayton began crying, so great was her joy. If the daughter *had* written home for help, the letter never had been delivered, the housekeeper declared.

"Oh!" she concluded, dabbing at her eyes. And there was a look on her face that made me think of summer sunshine. "Mr. Weckler will be *so* happy. For he had mourned over his lost daughter for years. I know, too, that he has tried hard to find her, but without success."

We talked then of how we could bring the kid

and his grandpa together. And learning that the grandson was tending store for us, less than a block away, Mrs. Clayton excitedly put on her hat and hurried down the street. But in her eagerness to see him she had no intention, of course, of saying anything to him about our plans. It was too soon. Afterwards I got a kick out of Tom's story of how a queer-acting customer breezed into the store, and instead of giving an order stood looking at him as though she wanted to jump over the counter and hug him. As a matter of fact, I suspect that Mrs. Clayton *did* want to hug him. Women are that way. And all wrapped up in Mr. Weckler, she was thinking, of course, of the happy days that were coming, with an old man's mind at ease, and a young heir stationed in the home of his people where he belonged.

At eight o'clock I skinned out for the depot. And pretty soon the train pulled in. Poppy got his eyes on me as he came down the steps with his suit case. And I didn't have to take a second look at him to know that his selling trip had been a fizzle, as I had suspected from the telegram. For his downcast face told the story. So, as soon as we got together, I hurriedly dished out to him the good news of Mr. Pennykorn's unexpected offer. By signing the paper, I ran on, we'd get our money back and two hundred dollars to boot. More than

that, there would be a general squaring-up all round.

"Lovely," says Poppy, as we hurried down the street, "if—"

"If what?"

"There isn't a nigger in the fence."

"Everything will be put down in black and white," I tried to quiet his suspicions. "So we'll know exactly what we're signing."

"And all we get clear is two hundred dollars, huh?"

I stared at him.

"*Good* night! Under the circumstances I think we're lucky to get that."

"The pickles are worth eighteen hundred dollars."

"To them—yes. But not to us."

"Evidently," mused Poppy, "the old geezer must want our pickles pretty badly to come chasing after us."

"I think he's very generous," says I.

"Don't be simple, Jerry. He hates us like a cat hates vinegar. And much less than wanting to do us a good turn, as you think, he'd squeeze us to the wall in a minute, if he got the chance."

The sweat began to stream down my face as I saw ruin ahead.

"Poppy, let me ask a favor of you."

"Shoot."

"Whatever else you do to-night at the bank, don't fly off the handle. I know he's done us dirt. And I know, too, that he hasn't any love for us. But, kid, we've got to face the fact that we're licked. There's no getting around that. Smart as we are, his money and influence have been too much for us. And if you shoot it back at him, and make him mad, he may close up like a clam and leave us in the lurch."

"What do you want me to do," says Poppy, "lick his hand?"

"We've got to knuckle down to him. It's as bitter to me, of course, as it is to you. But we've simply *got* to do it. There's no getting out of it. Anyway," I held up the brighter side, "we'll be richer by two hundred dollars. And Mrs. O'Mally will get her two-dollar price. So we haven't so terribly much to feel blue about. Then, too, there's the treasure."

Stopping in front of the police station, Poppy rubbered through the screen door.

"Wait here," says he, going inside, where he exchanged a few quick words with Bill Hadley, who, in reply, laughed and nodded. Had my mind been less jammed full of uneasiness, I might have been curious. But just then the more important thought to me was what would happen to us if Poppy's

temper did get away from him at the bank. Going to the wall, sort of, in bankruptcy, would Dad have to step in and foot my half of the losses? It was a sickening thought.

There was a light in the bank. And seeing two automobiles parked at the curb, one of which was the grandson's snappy little roadster, we weren't surprised, on being admitted, to find the whole family there.

"Have a seat," says young Pennykorn, as lordly-like as you please, "and we'll get down to business."

"Thanks," Poppy complied dryly.

The kid, it seemed, was going to do the talking. His grandfather and father apparently had made that arrangement with him. For they sat back in silence.

"I suppose young Todd has told you about the contract."

"Yes."

"He was in our office this afternoon and Grandpop made him an offer."

Poppy nodded.

"As I understand it," says he, "you want to take over our entire pickle stock."

"We're willing to do that."

"Also you want to take over our entire cucumber stock."

"If we close a deal with you for the pickles," the

kid admitted, "we'll also take over the cucumbers."

"And you agree to pay all of our debts, totaling that with a bonus of two hundred dollars."

"That's our proposition."

Poppy sort of turned up his nose.

"I suppose," says he, "that you think it's a fair proposition . . . for us."

Smarty stiffened, his cheeks puffing out.

"Fair?" he shot back angrily. "It's a blamed sight fairer than you deserve. If I had my way—"

"Forrest," came blandly from the banker, "unless you can handle this matter without losing your temper your father or I shall step in."

Poppy picked up the conversation.

"I take it for granted," says he, "that you know what you're getting for your money."

"We've checked over your stock, if that's what you mean."

"What do you figure the stock is worth?"

"Why ask us?" evaded the kid. "You own it."

"I was just wondering," says Poppy, "if your estimate is as high as ours."

The banker cleared his throat.

"They are unproven pickles," he spoke up. "So it would be—ah—absurd to give them a high valuation."

"If you're in doubt about them," came the shot, "why do you want them?"

The banker colored.

"It's awfully hot in here," Poppy mopped his face with his handkerchief. Then he got up and opened a window, through which we could hear the evening traffic in Main Street. "There," he drew a deep breath, "that's better."

Smarty was glaring.

"You've got your nerve."

"Sit down and shut up," says Poppy, "before I shut you up." Then he wheeled and faced the banker. "It's plain to me now why you wrote that lying letter about us. It was a scheme to tie up our stock. And now you think you can buy our pickles at your own terms."

The banker's face hardened.

"You had better curb your tongue, young man."

"Oh! . . ." Poppy's eyes blazed. "You'd like to shut me up, would you? You don't like to have me tell you to your face what a crooked piece of work that letter was. Glare at me, if you want to. I'm not afraid of you. As it happens I've been out in the field talking with your wholesalers. And I know why you want our pickle stock. You're in a hole. You've booked orders that you can't fill. And you're trying now to buy our pickles to save yourself. Well, let me tell you something—you aren't going to get a single pickle from us. Nor a

single cucumber, either. Put that in your pipe and smoke it."

Smarty started forward.

"I'll knock your block off!"

But the banker called for silence.

"Young man," says he in an icy voice, "you're a fool. For no one but a fool, caught as you are, would impertinently turn down an offer such as we have made you. You have just one more chance—"

"To do what?—sign your paper?"

"Here it is. As a matter of fact," came steely-like, "we *do* need your pickles. And what's more, we're going to get them. For you're going to sign this paper before you leave here."

Click! went the key in the lock.

"They can't get out now, Grandpop."

The banker held out a pen.

"Sign," he commanded, and as I got a look at his glittering eyes all I could think of was a snake.

But instead of taking the pen, Poppy stepped quickly to the open window.

"Howdy, Bill," he spoke to some one outside.

"Howdy, Poppy," says Bill Hadley.

"Nice evening."

"Swell," drawled Bill. "Full moon, I notice."

"Say, Bill."

"Yep?"

"If you aren't in any hurry just stick around for a few minutes longer. Will you?"

I saw now why Poppy had stopped at the police station. He had suspected that an attempt would be made to force us to sign the paper. And how slick of him to get the window open without exciting the enemy's suspicion!

The banker had to do considerable gulping before he found his voice.

"Unlock the door, Forrest," says he hoarsely. "You shouldn't have locked it in the first place."

Poppy stopped in the doorway.

"By the way," says he sweetly, "I forgot to tell you that we couldn't have signed your paper anyway. For this afternoon when I was in Chicago I not only sold every pickle that we've got in stock, but I further got orders for all we can make in the next six weeks."

"It's a lie!" thundered the banker. "No boy could do it."

"You would be doing boys an injustice," was Poppy's parting shot, "if you were to judge them all by your grandson."

CHAPTER XXI

IN THE SHADOW OF THE CHIMNEY

As soon as we hit the street I weaved over to the curb and collapsed.

"What's the matter?" grinned old surprise package. "Are you tired?"

"Kid," I recovered my voice, "I'm paralyzed with joy. Is it true?"

For answer he subtracted a sheaf of orders from his inside coat pocket.

"It was easy, Jerry, after I once got on the right track."

I drew a deep breath.

"Poppy," says I, loving him with my eyes, "you're a wonder."

"Aw! . . . Cut out the 'wonder' stuff," he shrugged, "and let's lasso a couple of sandwiches. For I haven't had my supper yet."

"You ought to write a book," I further bragged on him.

"A cook book?" he grinned.

"No. A book on selling. For you surely know how to do it. Who was the first victim to come under your hypnotic influence?"

"One of the railroad officials."

"Conductor?"

"No. President."

"What?" I squeaked. Yet, knowing him so well, I shouldn't have been surprised.

He dropped down beside me.

"It's funny, Jerry," says he, "what queer ideas a fellow gets about big business men. I always pictured a railroad president as a towering, square-shouldered, high-pressure man with a foghorn voice and sixteen jumping secretaries. But Mr. Lorrimer wasn't that kind of a man at all. In fact, when I found out that he was the president of the railroad you could have knocked me over with a feather. And did I ever feel silly for a minute or two! For I had been razzing his pickles."

I didn't get that.

"We were in the dining car," Poppy then explained more fully. "Me on one side of the small table and little snappy eyes on the other side. I noticed that the waiters gave him a lot of attention. But, as I say, I never dreamed that he was the president of the railroad. Looked to me more like the proprietor of a peanut stand, or something like that. We talked back and forth. Then some cucumber pickles were brought in. They weren't much, I said, thinking of our own swell pickles. That kind of ruffled little what's-his-name. I had

to tell him then who I was, after which he sent the waiter to get my sample case. Then, finding that my pickles were everything that I had claimed for them, he called in another man, who turned out to be the food buyer for the railroad. 'Samson,' says he, 'this boy has something we need in connection with our dining-car service. Look into his proposition, please. And see what can be done.' "

"And then," says I, anticipating the story's ending, "is when the big order was shoved at you, huh?"

"I got an order," he nodded. "But it wasn't so very big. Only six ten-gallon kegs."

I searched his face.

"But you said in the bank that you had sold our entire stock."

"And so I have . . . but the railroad company didn't buy the big bulk of it, though, to that point, we probably will get bigger orders from them when they learn that we're dependable. Getting my story, Mr. Samson asked me why I didn't try the big Chicago hotels and restaurants. They bought tremendous quantities of food, he said, and always were on the lookout for a 'special.' He even gave me a note of introduction to one buyer. So, instead of stopping in Joliet, as had been my plan in starting out I went on into the city. And there, kiddo, is where I got the big orders. Oh, baby! My only

worry now is shipments. I'm wondering if we can make good."

"And you knew all this," I gave him a stiff eye, "when you sent that telegram?"

"Sure thing," he grinned. "I thought it would be fun to throw a scare into you. As a matter of fact, the order that I mentioned in the telegram is the smallest of the lot."

At the restaurant I asked them to bring me a cup of strong coffee. I felt I needed it. For in checking over Poppy's orders I found that they totaled more than six thousand dollars.

Tom Weir collided with us in front of the hash house.

"I've been looking all over town for you."

"What's the matter?" says Poppy, noticing how excited the other was. "Has the cat killer been after you?"

Tom shook his head.

"It's the gold cucumber."

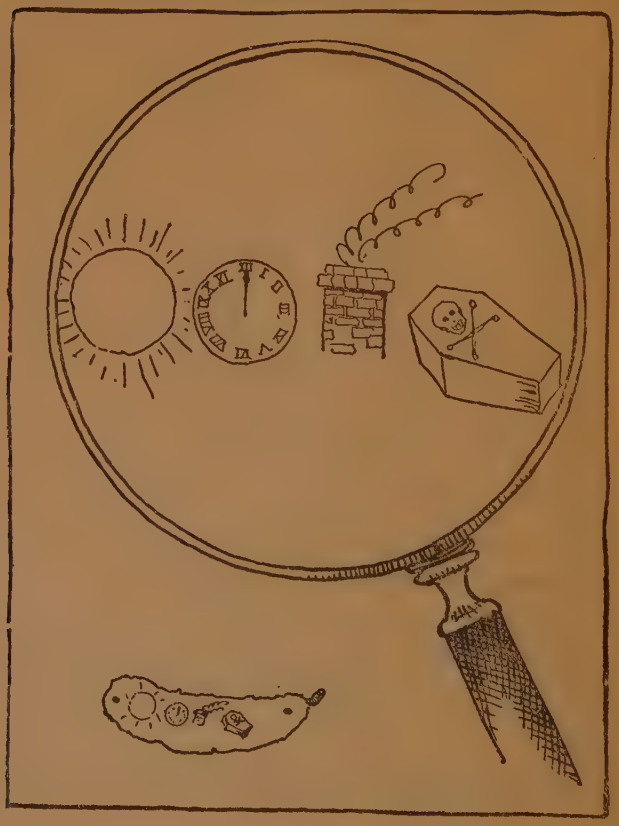
I should have mentioned that the cucumber had been returned to our new chum and his uncle. And now Tom brought it out of his pocket in two pieces.

"We were looking at it to-night," he explained, "trying again to figure out its secret. Dropping it by accident, Mrs. O'Mally rocked on it. We found out then that it had been made in halves and put together with gold rivets."

"Did anything come out of it?" cried Poppy excitedly.

"No. But if you'll take this piece closer to the light you'll find it's got a lot of queer marks on it."

Later I made a drawing of the marks. Here it is:



Poppy studied the pictures, realizing, of course, that they composed the "key" to the treasure's hiding place.

"The first picture," says he, "is the sun."

"Either that," say I, putting my own beezer to work, "or a full moon."

"A full moon! That's it! For pirates always hid their stuff by moonlight. A gold cucumber first. Then a full moon. That must mean a full moon in cucumber time."

"Lay to it, old Sherlock," I patted the brainy one on the back. "You're getting warmer every minute."

"This is a clock," says Tom, pointing to the second picture.

"Sure thing," waggled Poppy. "And the hands point to twelve, which means noon or midnight."

"Midnight, of course," I swung in. "For whoever heard of a full moon in the middle of the day?"

There was more deep studying.

"I don't get the third picture," says Poppy.

"Looks like soap bubbles," says I.

"Or a string of magician's rings," says Tom.

"Do you suppose that it's a chimney. Those circles may be smoke rings."

I gave a yip.

"Sure thing, it's a chimney," says I, with a

picture of the old stone house in my mind. "And we know what chimney, too."

"The last picture is a coffin."

"Br-r-r-r!" I shimmied. "Let's hope we don't have to tackle any graveyard stuff."

Tom further studied the third picture.

"Maybe the treasure is hid in the big chimney," says he. "And to get it we've got to go in from the top."

"But what's the idea of the other pictures?" puzzled Poppy.

"The only thing a moon does," says I, "is to make light. And light makes shadows. So maybe we're supposed to dig in the shadow of the chimney, or something like that."

"Jerry, old pal, that little beezer of yours sure is popping off steam to-night. Coffins always go in the ground. So we're supposed to *dig*. And the moon and the chimney tell where to dig."

We lit out then for the stone house. And up in the sky was the biggest, fattest moon you ever laid eyes on. Uncle Abner and Mrs. O'Mally were waiting up for us, playing the talking machine. Pretty soon the clock struck midnight. And going outside we marked off the shadow of the chimney, as it showed on the ground, and began to dig. It was hard work. But we never let up, even though we were blinded by the sweat that streamed down our

faces. For comfort we took off our coats and shirts. We now were working in a hole almost four feet deep. Then, about two o'clock in the morning, we found it!

Getting the iron chest out of the hole, after a whale of a lot of pulling and tugging, we whacked the rusted padlock to pieces with the pick and threw back the cover. Nor were we disappointed! And, to that point, I sometimes wonder if another such peculiar treasure ever was brought to light. Gold cucumbers! Thousands of them—or so it seemed to us at the exciting moment.

To-day Poppy and I each have a snug little nest egg of seven thousand dollars tucked away in Mr. Lorring's bank. That was our share of the treasure. For the gold, of course, was later sold. And you understand, too, that each of the other three got the same amount. Thirty-five thousand dollars! That was the total amount of the treasure. Not as much as we had expected. But are we kicking? I hope to snicker we aren't.

The newspapers all over the state made a big thing of the recovered treasure. And a reporter with shell-rimmed glasses and spats came all the way from Chicago to take pictures. I felt pretty big when I saw my picture in the newspaper. Right beside old Peg-leg, too—only, of course, his picture was made up. And what a picture it was! But the

newspaper story got little attention from Poppy. Pedigreed Pickles was still the big thing in his mind. For he had the job now of getting organized for still heavier production.

I might say in that connection that the Methodist ladies perked up somewhat when we gave them a check for one hundred and eighty dollars, which paid them for the work they had done to date. Still, though they were willing to go on, we felt that we had more cucumbers than they could handle. And not wanting to be partial, just because we were Methodists, we gave the Presbyterian ladies a chance to pull a few nails out of their church debt. Then we put the Catholic ladies to work. Pickles, pickles, pickles! The town was flooded with pickles. We shipped them out right and left. And how grand and glorious was the feeling when the little old checks began to roll in.

We went after the cat killer, too. But before I write down that part, let me tell you about the banquet that the Chamber of Commerce put on. Gee! That was one time, I guess, when old Poppy was completely knocked off his pins. Every time I think of the "speech" he made that night I laugh myself sick.

CHAPTER XXII

GUESTS OF HONOR

One morning shortly after the recovery of the treasure Mr. Lorring called us into the bank.

"The first thing you young whippersnappers know," he lit into us in his booming way, "you're going to have a damage suit on your hands."

"What's wrong?" says Poppy, kind of anxious-like, his thoughts, of course, turning instantly to the canning company.

"WHAT'S WRONG!" came the increased thunder. "Look at me! I'm wasting away. In one week I've dropped from two-eighty to two-seventy-seven."

We were grinning now. For we saw that he wasn't really huffy. He was just pretending.

"It's your confounded pickles," he went on. "They're interfering with my domestic affairs. In the morning my wife is in such a hurry to get over to the church that she doesn't half prepare breakfast. She's never home at noon. And at night the cry is that she's 'too tired to cook.' To a man who

loves victuals, as I do, this is a hardship. And I've made up my mind to protest."

"I don't blame you," grinned Poppy. "And the thing for you to do, Mr. Lorring, as I see it, is to help us start up a regular pickle factory. Then we can release the church women, and your wife will do her cooking at home."

'Um . . ." the gray eyes twinkled. "A pickle factory, heh? Think you can make a go of it?"

"I don't see why we can't."

"Would it surprise you," Mr. Lorring then looked at us curiously, "to know that yesterday afternoon I had a long talk with Mr. Foreman Pennykorn?"

"About us?" says Poppy quickly, his voice touched with uneasiness. For he realized, of course, that we had been called into the bank on a matter of importance.

"Partly. But our talk was mostly about pickles and community interests. Now, I know how you boys feel toward the canning company. It's your idea that they gave you a crooked deal, and so you've got it in for them. On the other hand they're equally bitter toward you, because of your interference. So, in a way, it's six of one against a half dozen of the other. And any sensible concession from their side ought to be matched by a similar concession from your side. That's good business. Naturally, under the circumstances, you want to

further buck them by starting up a pickle factory of your own. And if you decide to go ahead on that plan, getting financial backing elsewhere, I can't stop you. But I'm not sure that it would be the best thing for you to do, or, even more important, the best thing for the town. You might make a success of your new factory; then again you might not. Everything is all right so far. And, to that point, you deserve a great deal of credit for what you've done, Poppy in particular. As you boys probably realize, I think a great deal of you. I'm proud of you, in fact. You're just the kind of up-and-coming boys we need. So, keep it up. It's good for you and also good for the community. To get back to the pickle proposition, though, I have been asked by Mr. Pennykorn to use my influence to bring you and the canning company together."

"Never!" cried Poppy, with flashing eyes.

"And why not?" came steadily.

"I guess you don't know everything they've done, Mr. Lorring. For if you did you'd realize how impossible it is for us ever to tie up with them."

"Outside of the fact that you have a boyish hatred for them, are you afraid they'll skin you?"

"They would if they got a chance."

"But suppose I make it my business, as your older friend, to see that they never get such a

chance—though, to that point, I haven't much doubt of their honesty."

"What do you mean?" says Poppy, more quietly.

"Here's the proposition that Mr. Pennykorn asked me to put before you: They want to organize a separate pickle branch. As you know, they talked of buying a plant in Ashton. But the local Chamber of Commerce has talked them out of that notion. And they have agreed to build the proposed new plant here *if* they can immediately take over your cucumber stock and further get exclusive manufacturing rights on your 'Pedigreed Pickles,' as a companion line to their 'Dandy Dills.' The new company, to call it that, will be capitalized at one hundred thousand dollars, and common stock, having a par value of one hundred dollars a share, will be issued in the amount of sixty thousand dollars, the balance of the stock to be held in reserve, as is quite proper. Of the six hundred issued shares, you boys will be given fifty shares apiece; Mrs. O'Mally the same. If the stock earns ten per cent, each one's share of the yearly earnings will be five hundred dollars. Also there is the possibility of greater earnings, which would materially increase the value of the stock. Personally, I think it is a very fair proposition. And my advice would be for you to accept it. Nor need you have any uncertainty over your position as minority stock

holders. I'll see that you are properly taken care of."

It was then further pointed out to us how much better the established company could serve the town than us. So we finally told Mr. Lorring that we would do whatever he thought was best. In due time the promised stock was delivered, after which, of course, the Pennykorns were as nice as pie to us. I suppose it was best for us to bury the hatchet. But, to this day, I still feel sort of queer when I'm around them. I'll never forget that exciting night in the bank. I guess they never will, either. I don't see how they could.

Having come to a settlement with the canning company, the public announcement was then made that ground would soon be broken for a separate new pickle factory. And in celebration the Chamber of Commerce got up a swell supper, to which all of the surrounding farmers were invited. The word got out, too, that the canning company was going to issue new contracts, under which they would agree to pay the farmers the highest market prices for their stuff. That, of course, made everybody happy. So it was a lively bunch that turned out to the big feed, with the Tutter band doing the tooting stuff and the big hall all dolled up in fancy paper streamers. Poppy and I were there, for they couldn't very well leave us out. And I

guess it was Mr. Lorring's doings that we got places at the head table, where the big basket of artificial fruit was. Boy, oh, boy, did we ever light into that grub! Then, at the invitation of the master of ceremonies, or whatever you call him, several prominent business men made short speeches about "the most progressive little city in the middle west," after which came a long-winded introduction.

"And so," the master of ceremonies wound up, "it is my great pleasure, fellow boosters, to introduce one of the guests of honor, who, young as he is, has literally swept the nation off its feet. Seven-League Stilts! We all know who invented them. We know, too, who's responsible for this clever 'Pedigreed Pickles' idea. . . . Let's have a few words from Poppy Ott."

Gee-miny Christmas! Poppy and I almost fainted. Guests of honor! We were it and never had suspected it! Finally, though, I got some of my senses back.

"Get up," I kicked old dumb-bell under the table. "They're calling on you."

Well, he got up—though it took him a long time to do it. He was kind of white, too, like the time he ate the green apples. And, oh, gee, how proud I was of him! *My* pal! The bulliest pal in the whole world! A few months ago he was a tramp. And now see him. Good old Poppy!

Everything was deadly still. For everybody was waiting to hear the speech. Presently Poppy sat down. And then you should have heard the applause! Afterwards he asked me, kind of sheepish-like, what he had said. And did I ever *laugh!* For the funny part is that he *never said a word!*

In conclusion, I hardly need to tell you that Tom and his recovered grandpa were brought together. And was that ever a joyful meeting for the old gentleman. Tom now lives in the old-fashioned house near the canning factory. He's crazy over our Pickle Parlor and I imagine that we'll sell out to him in time, as the building and lot are his, anyway. You'll smile when I tell you that Uncle Abner and Mrs. O'Mally got married. As for old Butch, he got a steady job up the canal and never came back.

Picking up the story of Tom's father, Nathan Weir wasn't dead, as his family had supposed, but for years he had been in the Ohio state penitentiary, where he had been taken following a robbery in which he had been shot in the arm. Blood poison setting in, the arm was later taken off. His wife had died, and from his long absence it was concluded that he was dead, too. Getting out of the penitentiary, he had come back to Rimtown, finding his father dead and the family scattered. After that he got mixed up in a jewel robbery in

Peoria, and to hide from the law he came to Tutter, knowing about the old tunnel—and what was his amazement to find his brother and son living near the pirate's old home in a cave! Learning about the gold cucumber, from listening, he had stolen it, thinking that it would give him the "key" to the treasure's hiding place. Failing in this, he finally decided to lay low and secretly grab the treasure when the others had lifted it. His mind was "off," or otherwise, in having heard about our "diamonds" he wouldn't have broken into Poppy's cellar. For he should have known that there was no connection between our advertised "diamonds" and those of which he had been robbed by his crooked Peoria accomplice. Later he got the idea that the diamonds were in Mr. Weckler's safe . . . yet how peculiar must have been his feelings to break into that particular house! No doubt he stepped on the yellow cat. And in all probability its yowling made him furious, which would explain why he strangled it. The "machine" that we had seen at church was just a contraption that some boy had rigged up. I think it was Spider Whickleberry. I heard the kids telling afterwards how slick Spider could pick off cats. He thought it was fun to catch them and then let them go.

We found the "cat strangler" living in a hut in the heart of the willow patch. He was sick. And

two days later he died in the hospital. As he was Tom's father, the less we say about him the better. He's gone. And that's enough.

My story comes to an end here. And I can only hope that you have enjoyed it. Coming soon is POPPY OTT AND THE FRECKLED GOLDFISH. Can you imagine a scientist spending his whole lifetime studying *freckles?* Professor Aldercott Pip, A.B., M.A., Ph.D., modestly claimed to be the best-informed freckle specialist in the world. But we could hardly credit our ears when we heard about his marvelous "freckle" dust. Gosh! Then came the amazing surprise of the freckled goldfish!

It was Poppy, of course, who planned our new "aquarium" fish store. And was it ever a darb! In the selling campaign that followed our main slogan was: "What is home without a freckled goldfish?" We got up all kinds of nifty schemes. "You trade in your old-fashioned auto for a new one," he told the Tutter people, "so why not trade in your old-fashioned goldfish and get one of the up-to-date freckled kind?"

"The book of a million laughs!" That is what you'll call it when you've read it. And remember, too, it's coming soon.

THE END

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